FEAR of FALLING

THE FALLING SERIES

KENADEE BRYANT

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BOOK ONE

KENADEE BRYANT

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DEDICATION

To every girl who's ever wanted a dirty mouth hockey player—
This ones for you.

JOSIE

Tonight, the Toronto Knights are set to play against the Montreal Bears in an attempt to put an end to their six-game losing streak. Despite winning the Cup Championship two years ago, they missed out last year in a nail-biting finale after center Wyatt Boone, tore his ACL during the game. While things looked up for the Knights with the return of their star player this season, Boone's missing his edge, leaving both critics and fans wondering if he'll bounce back in time to save their season.

I winced as I read the article on my phone. I was one of those hockey fans worrying about the team. It was still early in the season, but six losses in a row was a bitter pill to swallow. Especially when the Knights have three of the best players in the league.

The sound of my name echoing through my office phone speaker pulled me from my thoughts, and I placed my phone face down on my desk.

"Hey, Josie, can I see you in my office for a moment?" My boss, Lydia Ellis, asked.

"I'm on my way," I replied, hitting save on the document I was working on before I was distracted by my phone. Tucking it into my pocket, I headed down the hall to my boss's office. There was a flurry of last-minute activity across the floor as everyone finished up their work for the day. I'd hoped to do the same, but I had a feeling my boss had other plans. On Friday's we rarely worked past three o'clock, and as the clock ticked closer, I was more than ready to head home and relax. There was a dull ache forming in my temples and behind my eyes from staring at my computer screen for far too long, and I was in dire need of a glass of wine.

Standing outside my boss's office, I took a moment to smooth over my clothes before I knocked twice and opened the door. Lydia sat at her desk, her short blonde hair all I could see as she focused on her computer screen, fingers flying over the keyboard.

"You needed me?"

"Yes, come in," Lydia said with a final tap on the keys before she looked up with a smile and leaned back in her chair. "How's the latest article coming along?" she asked, gesturing towards the chair opposite

her desk.

“It’s going well. I should have it done by Tuesday and ready for this month's edition,” I returned her smile as I sat.

Working at *Fusion Weekly Magazine* was my dream job. When I graduated from university with a degree in English and Photography, I thought I’d be lucky just to find a job at all. Finding one I loved still seemed like a pipe-dream. I spent months applying for jobs, gradually moving away from anything even remotely related to my degree, settling for odd jobs just to pay my rent.

I was juggling shifts between a local pizzeria and a fashion retailer when Lydia found me. In the midst of all my applications, one of her colleagues passed my resume on to her, thinking I’d be a better fit for what she was looking for. She must have seen something she liked because she came to the pizzeria and waited patiently until my break. I stank of pizza and sure as hell didn’t look like I belonged in an office, yet, after a quick chat, Lydia offered me a job at the magazine she was kick-starting.

Fusion Weekly was a mix between a magazine and a newspaper, hence the name. Our specialty was showcasing everything from local hot spots to keeping the city in the loop with upcoming events. I finally got to do what I enjoyed the most, taking photographs of food and people enjoying local events, concerts and sporting matches, and accompanying them with entertaining articles. All while getting paid. The cherry-on-top was the fact that Lydia had become one of my closest friends. I was living the dream. My dream.

“So…” By Lydia’s tone, I knew I wasn’t going home anytime soon, and I fought back the urge to groan. “I just received a last-minute request to send someone to cover a local football team that’s made it to the state championships.”

“And you said I would do it,” I finished for her. Her sheepish grin gave the answer away.

“Why me?” I could hear the whine creeping into my voice as the thought of that glass of wine drifted further from my grasp. I’d already spent the whole week following a local charity group as they planned their annual fund-raising event, taking photos and talking to various members. Then there was my usual workload of editing, writing blogs and my usual array of articles.

“Look, I know you’ve already had a full week, but I can trust you to do a great job even though it’s Friday afternoon. Besides,” she leaned on her desk, her eyes pleading. “They promised it would only take an hour. Tops. You take the best pictures of anyone here at the office *and* I’ll pay you overtime.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re trying to sweet talk me into this.”

Lydia grinned. “Is it working?”

"Maybe."

Lydia rested her chin on her hands. "Did I say you're the best reporter and photographer I have? That I would be lost without you?" This time I gave in and groaned aloud. As both my boss, and my best friend, she knew exactly how to get me to say yes. Being a people pleaser was a real bitch sometimes.

"Fine, I'll do it," I mumbled, and I thought if Lydia's smile grew any wider her face would crack.

"You're a lifesaver, Josie." Relief flashed in her eyes before she tapped on her keyboard once more, resulting in a ping from my phone. "There. I've just emailed you the details. Just take some pictures and ask the boys how they feel about making it to the championship. Get a statement from the Coach–you know, the heart-felt, inspirational stuff. Then you're done for the week. You can leave writing the article for Monday."

I nodded absently, already reviewing the details of her email on my phone. At least it wasn't that far from the office, and the assignment seemed straight-forward enough. I thought I'd easily knock it out in an hour if not less.

"I guess I'd better get going then, but you owe me one," I said as I stood and headed for the door.

"Yeah, yeah, add it to the list. Text me when you are done. Let me know if you want to hangout this weekend."

I waved over my shoulder as I stepped out of her office, closing the door behind me. The floor was almost empty as I returned to my desk to gather my camera and handbag. The sooner I got to the football field, the sooner I could get home and relax.

"JUST A LITTLE MORE TO YOUR RIGHT," I called out. "No, your other right."

I struggled to contain my frustration, sweeping my hair back from my face as the footballers jostled each other, not listening to a word I said. We were thirty-five minutes in, and I'd finally managed to get them all into position for the team photo. I hadn't expected to find it so challenging to fit forty-odd teenagers into a single frame, not to mention get them to hold their positions long enough for me to take the picture. I thought footballers were supposed to be disciplined, but this lot didn't take direction well.

At least, not from me. Instead, they argued about the order I positioned them in–which was in order of height. But then they

wanted to change the order based on their jersey numbers, only then I couldn't see everyone. All the while, their coach stood off to the side, having an animated conversation on his phone, seemingly oblivious to disaster unfolding before me.

My frustration was building, and I felt like I was seconds away from completely losing it. One simple picture–that's all I was asking for. I've had little kids act better than this, and trust me, wrangling kids for a photograph is hard work. Taking pictures of them running plays was easy–each of them happy to show off.

After *finally* getting the boys position, I called over to the coach to have him join the team. I then rapidly took a series of photographs before they all started moving again. Over an hour, and all I had were the photos. It was tempting to leave it at that and get on with my weekend, but Lydia had specified she wanted comments for the article, and there was no way I was coming back again next week. Overtime or not.

With my camera hanging from my neck and my phone's voice recording app on, I walked over to the boys. "Who would like to make a comment for the article?" I called out over the loud chatter. An instantaneous sea of heads turned towards me, before I suddenly found myself swarmed. "Okay, okay! One at a time, please!" I waved my hands to quieten them.

I should have known that a bunch of teenage boys required specific instructions as their attempts at humorous questions were thrown at me.

"Are you single?" The boy in front of me asked, with a mouthful of braces and a horrific haircut. He couldn't have been more than sixteen, but clearly thought he was smooth. I raised an eyebrow at him in response. Around him his friends snorted, a few slapping him on the back for what they thought was a ballsy act. "In your dreams," I replied, turning to the next player. His question was no better.

"Are you into football players, babe?"

It took everything I had not to laugh at his attempt at a suave smirk. Sophisticated, these boys weren't.

"Nope. Next."

"How about you and me ditch this place and go get something to eat." This boy went so far as to wink at me. I decided to call his bluff.

"Sure. Do you have a car?" I asked. The kid sputtered in front of me, his cheeks reddening in response. "Thought so." Before another boy could ask me out or make some stupid horny comment, I held my hands up and took charge. "I'm twenty-five and so far out of your league. That goes for *all* of you. Now if anyone actually has something to say about this team, or the upcoming championship, then step forward. If not, I suggest you go wait for your parents to pick you up."

The looks on their faces were priceless as suddenly none could meet my eye. They clearly weren't used to taking blows to their egos. With their humor deflated, they grumbled and started walking away towards the parking lot. I probably should have felt bad, but I didn't.

Aside from the fact they were all far too young, I was completely over this assignment. One that should have taken less than an hour had taken almost two. Yet, I still had no comments for the article. As I was about to call my losses and tell Lydia I'd come back next week, one of the boys appeared to change his mind as he turned and walked back towards me. He appeared to be one of the older of the team, 17 or 18, with a mop of dirty blond hair that he huffed out of his eyes.

"Sorry about them," he nodded back at the rest of his team. "I'm Mateo, team captain."

"Nice to meet you, Mateo."

"Do you still need some comments? I'm happy to help."

My eyebrows shot up, surprised by the legitimate offer. "Uh, yeah, I do." As much as I wanted to get home, I knew this was my way out of having to return on Monday. "I promise it will be quick." Before he could back out, I held my phone up and asked my first question. "So, this is the first time your team, *The Greyhounds,* has made it to the Championship. How excited are you and the team?"

"We're pumped!" he grinned, lighting up his features with excitement. "We came so close last year, but this year we're going to win it. I know we can."

I was pleasantly surprised by the maturity of his response– especially compared to his teammates. "So, you're a high school senior, correct?"

He nodded, still smiling.

"After graduation, are you planning to continue playing at university?"

"Sure am. I already have a few schools I'm interested in and hoping to play for."

I went on to ask him a few more questions about his time on the team, what he enjoyed most about playing football, and how he liked his coach. Once I was satisfied I had enough for the article, I turned off my voice recorder and slid my phone in my pocket.

"Thank you, Mateo. I appreciate you taking the time to answer my questions."

"No problem. Happy to help." Mateo huffed his hair out of his eyes again before he grinned.

"Good luck at the Championship," I smiled back, not wanting to keep either of us away from the weekend any longer.

"Thanks!" Giving me a nod, he turned on his heel and jogged towards the parking lot. By now almost everyone was gone, only a few

teens remained chatting as they waited for their parents, their coach long gone. Happy to have finally finished, I double checked I had all my things and headed back towards my car.

Sliding in the driver's seat, I pulled out my phone and sent Lydia a quick text to let her know I was done, including a reminder that she really owed me one. After securing my camera safely back in its case, I was finally ready to head home.

JOSIE

Thanks to the damn assignment taking so long, I found myself caught in the tail end of the traffic pouring out of the hockey arena. What should have been a fifteen-minute ride home turned into forty. By the time I reached my apartment building I was beyond tired, annoyed, and hungry.

With a sigh I grabbed my things and locked my car behind me, before walking to the entrance to the building.

“Miss Scott,” the doorman greeted me with a kindly nod. He was an older man who was always very sweet, and I usually made a point of making time for him. Yet, after the day I’d had, all I could muster was a smile in greeting as he held the door open for me.

I could hear my comfy couch calling my name, along with the leftovers in the fridge, and maybe the half-pint of my favorite ice-cream in the freezer. My stomach growled loudly at the thought.

Feeling my phone buzz, I pulled it out of my handbag as the elevator doors opened and I stepped inside. The score of this afternoon's hockey game tonight flashed across my screen and I winced. Damn another loss. Hitting 8 for my floor, I leaned back against the wall shaking my head at my phone.

At the sound of someone calling out, my head snapped up. A hand slid in-between the doors, preventing them from closing as the owner of the voice forced their way in. Despite the baseball cap covering most of their face, it was clearly a guy. A tall guy. My eyes fell onto the large gym bag hanging on his shoulder. For a brief second, I caught a symbol on it, but he moved, making it disappear. I tried to be discreet as I checked him out further. Track pants covered his long legs, and his sports jacket pulled taut over his broad, upper body and arms. Very muscular arms I may add.

Before he could catch me ogling him like a total idiot, I ducked my head and returned my attention back to my phone. Yet, I was all too aware of him leaning against the side of the elevator and I couldn’t help but sneak glances at him from under my lashes. The silence in the elevator was a bit stifling but I was always too awkward to initiate conversation first. Especially with a guy.

As the elevator rose, it jerked suddenly making me stumbled to the

side, gripping the railing. With a loud, mechanical groan, the elevator screeched to a jarring halt.

"What the fuck?" The words left my mouth before I could stop them, and horrified, I looked up at the stranger, our gazes clashing. "That wasn't meant to come out," I blurted, feeling the heat flushing my cheeks. A hint of a smile twitched at the corners of his mouth.

"Are we stuck?" I asked, looking over at the panel of buttons at his side. He reached over and pressed the number five button, but nothing happened. My grip tightened on the railing as he started pushing random buttons, but even when he pushed the emergency button nothing happened. When he muttered something close to *'shit'* under his breath I knew it was not a good sign.

"Oh god we are stuck." Panic squeezed at my chest as I gripped the railing harder. The thought of being trapped in a giant metal box horrified me and I felt my heart beating faster by the second.

"It's okay, someone was most likely notified when the elevator stopped. They'll send someone to come get us," the stranger spoke, his voice firm and confident. I said nothing, but I had a sinking feeling no one knew we were trapped.

I wasn't claustrophobic. No, it was the thought of being stuck for God knows how long that had me freaking out. Maybe the stranger was right, and someone was already on their way—but would it take an hour? Three? Ten? Would we be stuck for days? My thoughts were spiraling, scaring the shit out of me.

Turning my attention back to my phone, I saw I now had no reception. So, calling 9-1-1 was out of the question. Or anyone else for that matter. Groaning, I rested my head back against the wall, clutching my useless phone in my free hand. I felt the guy's stare, compelling me to speak. "No service."

My horror and anger at the situation shifted to resignation. It felt like a fitting end to a day that had gone from shit to shittier. All I had wanted to do was come home and relax but it seemed today was not my day.

With my feet aching, I slid down the wall and sat on the ground, stretching out my legs as I placed my handbag and camera bag beside me. I figured I might as well get comfortable.

Lydia really owes me.

As the stranger dropped his bag to the floor, I watched him from the corner of my eye as he followed my lead, sinking to the floor. His legs were so long that they almost reached the other side of the elevator, and his huge presence seemed to make the already small elevator feel smaller.

His baseball cap was still lowered so I couldn't see his face clearly, but it didn't take a genius to know he was attractive. Once again

finding myself staring at him, I blushed and forced myself to look around the elevator. There really wasn't anything to look at, given that it was just a big metal box with a panel of buttons. On the plus side, the lights remained on, so it wasn't pitch black.

Silence stretched between us, almost deafening over our breathing and the occasional shuffle as we shifted. I wasn't confident enough to start a conversation and he didn't seem to be in the mood either. The silence between us grew more awkward with each passing minute.

I could feel the cold seeping through my jeans through the floor of the elevator and I pulled my knees up. Not knowing what else to do, I checked my phone again, hoping we'd magically regained cell service, but of course my phone flashed zero bars still. I groaned under my breath. *Great.*

The silence dragged on, filling the space around us like an enormous bubble waiting to burst. I couldn't take it anymore. "I'm Josie," I introduced myself, my voice sounding high-pitched and a little manic. Inwardly, I facepalmed myself.

Way to go. Now he'll just think he's stuck in here with a crazy person.

Slowly, his head turned in my direction. While the brim of his baseball cap hid most of his face, I was certain I could feel his eyes on me. It was as though I could sense him taking in every line, every freckle, on my face.

"Wyatt," he finally spoke, and I felt a little thrill at the sound of his voice, though I told myself it was only because it was preferable to the silence. "Nice to meet you," I replied with a small smile.

Inwardly, I marveled at how well his name suited him. Not to mention, I found his name attractive, which was weird in and of itself. I chalked it up to not having much to eat since lunch, staying late at work, and being trapped in an eight-by-eight metal box with a total stranger. A hot stranger.

Suddenly, my thoughts took a darker turn, as I realized that I was, in fact, trapped with a stranger—one who could easily overpower me if he wanted. Though I wasn't getting 'killer/stalker' vibes from him, that didn't stop my mind from racing. Discreetly, I shifted away from him an inch. Oblivious, he reached forward and grabbed his gym bag as I kept my eyes on him. As he flipped it around, I caught a proper glimpse of the logo, and my mouth fell open in surprise. It was the *Toronto Knights* hockey team logo.

I flicked my gaze upwards, trying to determine if there was any recognition in the limited view I had of his profile. Did he play for the team? I was sure I would have heard if there was a professional hockey player living in this apartment building. Nothing that exciting would remain a secret, but I was coming up blank. I reminded myself I'd lived there less than a year and I kept to myself most of the time.

While he rummaged in his bag, his head tilted to the side, catching the light, showcasing his sculpted jawline what looked like kissable lips.

Holy shit.

I'm not sure what it was, but suddenly I knew exactly who I was trapped with. Wyatt Boone. The lead Forward for the *Toronto Knights* hockey team and the best hockey player in the league.

WYATT

45 minutes earlier …

I stormed through the locker room and threw my helmet into my cubby stall. With gritted teeth I ripped at my gear, eager to be rid of it. My team-mates shuffled in behind me, but I paid them no attention. I could practically feel the disappointment coming off them in waves as they headed for their own locker stalls. We'd lost. Again. The sixth straight loss in a row. Each against teams we had annihilated before, which just added insult to injury.

I could feel eyes on me, but I refused to turn around as I quickly took off my gear and shoved it into my cubby. I was pissed off. Beyond pissed off. It was my fault that we didn't win. There were multiple shots I should have easily made, yet every shot went wide. It was like my head and body weren't in sync. One by one, I could feel every single gaze of my teammates looking to me for answers. And fuck, I had none to give them.

Strands of sweaty hair hung in my eyes as I sat on the bench, leaning down to unlace my skates. I needed to get out, to leave this damn locker room and away from everyone. Away from the accusation in their stares.

"B?"

I ignored the nickname everyone on the team called me, shoving my skates into my cubby. Management wouldn't be thrilled with the mess I'd left it in, but I didn't have it in me to feel anything other than disappointment and anger.

I was in the middle of stripping off my sweaty under shirt when I felt a presence behind me. I knew who it was. Only my best friend would dare approach me then.

"Fuck off Trevor," I grunted, grabbing a clean t-shirt and pulling it over my head. I slid on a pair of sweatpants before grabbing my regular shoes. I should have been putting my suit on, ready for the post-game press, but that was the last thing I wanted to do.

"It wasn't your fault, Wyatt," Trevor tried again, but I just shook my head.

"Stop."

“Come on, dude. Don’t be like that.”

I knew I was being a dick, but I couldn’t help it. With the mood I was in, I knew it was in everyone’s best interests that I left before I said something I’d regret. Especially to the one friend that had been with me through thick and thin.

Once I had my shoes on, I stood up and grabbed my bag, pulling my baseball cap over my damp hair. I looked over at Trevor—the stubborn bastard still stood there. “I’ll see you later.”

With that I stalked towards the door. Without a word to anyone else I slipped out of the locker room and headed for the back door of the stadium, away from the reporters I knew would be waiting at the main entrance. After tonight, they'd be like vultures wanting answers on why the Toronto Knights, the most unbeatable team for the last few years, had lost yet another game.

Why their star player, Wyatt Boone, couldn’t make a single shot.

Cursing under my breath I ducked my head lower and shouldered open the door. I took a quick glance around, ensuring the coast was clear before I strode across the parking lot, pressing the button on my key to unlock my car. I tossed my bag in the backseat before quickly sliding in behind the wheel.

All I wanted to do right now was go home and drown my disappointment in alcohol. The idea of getting black out drunk sounded extremely enticing. Yet, the last thing I wanted was to go out and be recognized by the public. Not after they saw the game tonight. I usually didn’t mind going out after a game, celebrating with my boys or even slightly wallowing in a loss, but tonight wasn’t the night for it. I’d be nothing more than a black cloud imposing on everyone’s night.

I sent a quick wave to the security guard by the gate as I drove through, feeling a sense of relief to leave the stadium in my rearview mirror. However, I’d only made it a few blocks before I found myself stuck in game day traffic. Normally I would be in the locker room or doing interviews while the fans left, and by the time I left, the worst of the traffic had dissipated.

Leaning my head back, I pounded the steering wheel in my frustration, knowing I’d be stuck in the traffic for ages. My mood darkened further as my evening of drinking alone in my apartment ebbed further away.

Over thirty minutes later, the traffic eased as I neared home, clutching the steering wheel so tightly my knuckles turned white. As soon as I pulled into my apartment parking lot, I wasted no time in grabbing my hockey bag and making my way through the private entrance I used daily.

Up ahead the elevator doors were slowly closing, and not wanting to have to wait for its return, I ran towards it. At the last second, I

dangerously shoved my hand between the doors, forcing them open. I briefly noticed someone else was already in there, but I kept my head down, hiding my face as best I could beneath my cap. I knew if I looked up, I would likely be recognized, and that was not what I needed right now. I didn't trust what I'd say if someone asked me about the game tonight.

Turning my back on them, I pressed the button for my floor, and I leaned against the wall, fighting the urge to tap my foot as I waited for the elevator to go up. As it started to move, I dared a peek towards the other passenger. My eyes took in the long, slender legs, clad in the tightest pair of jeans I'd ever seen. I allowed my gaze to travel further up until I saw the face those legs belonged to.

She stared down at the phone in her hands, her light brown hair falling around her face. From here I could make out a slight frown, and the downward turn of her lips. For some reason I wanted to know why. I could practically see the tension in her shoulders as she hunched forward. There was something about her expression that made me think her day had been just as shitty as mine.

Any further thoughts were paused as the elevator suddenly lurched. Gripping the railing, I held my ground as we came to a screeching halt. *What the…*

"What the fuck?"

It took a second for me to realize the words were not my own. No, they came from the stranger next to me. My head whipped over to hers, our eyes meeting for the first time. I was struck by a pair of gorgeous brown eyes, widening as she realized what she'd just said.

A slight blush appeared on her cheeks, and despite myself, I felt the corners of my mouth twitch. She looked away but I couldn't help but stare at the side of her profile. Even with the red cheeks she was cute. No, not cute…more like beautiful. As soon as the word entered my thoughts, I shoved it aside.

Now's not the time, Wyatt.

"Are we stuck?" she asked, her voice like honey—though she sounded a little freaked out. I ignored the way her words washed over me, focusing instead on pressing the floor buttons on the panel. When that proved useless, I pressed the emergency button. When nothing happened, my stomach dropped in realization.

"Oh god, we're stuck."

I could hear the panic in her voice and felt the strange urge to try to make her feel better. "It's okay. Someone will have been notified when the elevator stopped. They'll send someone to come get us," I said, trying to sound comforting but I wasn't sure I was helping. Her wide-eyed stare showed she wanted to believe me, but we both knew there was a chance no one was coming.

Of course, my luck was getting shittier and shittier. First the game, and now a broken-down elevator.

Perfect.

Next to me the girl held her phone up, letting out the smallest of groans. The sound sent a strange shiver up my spine.

"No service," she mumbled.

I forced myself to look away from her, not wanting to be caught staring. From the corner of my eye, I watched her sit down on the floor, putting her bags beside her. Following her lead, I let my bag drop to the floor before following it—not an easy feat in someone of my build. With a sigh, I rubbed a hand across my face. I felt exhausted and annoyed, and I longed for the comfort and privacy of my apartment.

Instead, I had nothing to distract me from the night's game as it played on a loop in my head. Replaying all the missed shots and opportunities. The last six games have been nothing but disappointing, for everyone. I knew it took a team to win a game, not just one person, but it seemed like our entire team had fallen to the wayside—and I felt responsible.

Everything rested on my shoulders. I was under so much pressure to return to being *The* Wyatt Boone. Get the team back on track. Be the best Captain. It's a lot.

And now I'm stuck in a broken elevator. Maybe I should have done the damn post-game interviews. Could have avoided this whole fiasco.

The silence in the elevator expanded, urging me to say something, but I just didn't want to risk her recognizing me. I wasn't being arrogant in the assumption. Girls in Toronto loved hockey players. Puck Bunnies everyone called them. There are literally groups of girls that hang outside the arena just to see if they can hook up with a player. They approach us when we are out celebrating, or outside the arena. I'd be lying if I said I hated the attention. Hell, back in the day after a game I'd take one of those girls home without a second thought.

But not anymore.

"I'm Josie," she said suddenly, her honey-like voice instantly drawing me out of my thoughts.

I peered at her from under my baseball cap. The light above us was dingy but I could still make out her features. Cute freckles dotted her cheeks, lips that looked full and kissable, her eyes kind, albeit filled with anxiety.

Her name echoed in my head. *Josie.* I liked it.

"Wyatt," I finally managed to say. I was happy to withhold my last name—it was safer that way. I've been around plenty of women whose demeanor changed once they knew who I was. Instantly they

start batting their eyelashes and flirting. Although after the way I've played lately, perhaps not so much.

"Nice to meet you," Josie replied with a soft, easy, smile that cemented the fact that I didn't want her to know who I was. Just once I wanted to be Wyatt. The person I was before it all changed. Not *Wyatt Boone—star hockey player*.

Glancing away from her, I reached for my bag. I stashed my phone in there earlier, not wanting to deal with the texts/calls I was bound to get after the game—especially after bailing on the press. As I glanced at the screen, I noted the number of missed texts and calls from my family and two best friends before shoving it back. It wasn't like I could respond with no service anyways.

I settled back against the elevator wall, resigned that we were going to be in here awhile. Beside me Josie was fiddling with something, a camera.

"Are you a photographer?" I found myself asking, curious.

"I am." Her hands played with the strap of the camera as she spoke.

"What kind of pictures do you take?"

"I work for a magazine called *Fusion Weekly*. I take pictures of everything. One day I'll be photographing the food at a local restaurant and the next I'll be at some concert," she explained. "My boss lets me have creative control most of the time which is a rarity," Josie rambled. "Sorry I tend to talk incessantly until someone tells me to stop." She ducked her head, cheeks turning pink.

I felt a smile tug at the corners of my mouth again. I thought she sounded cute when she rambled. "No, don't be sorry. If you are passionate about something you should talk about it." I was a firm believer of chasing after your dreams. For as long as I could remember, all I'd wanted to do was play hockey. I'd dreamt of making it to the big leagues, of playing on the world stage while fans cheered my name.

"I do love my job, even on bad days. Not everyone can say that," she said softly.

I silently agreed with her. It's not everyday someone gets to do something they love.

"Was today a bad day?" I couldn't help but ask, the frown on her face from earlier coming to mind.

"I mean, I've had worse days. My boss asked me to do a last-minute photoshoot which resulted in me getting hit on by a bunch of 15–18-year-olds."

I tried not to laugh, I really did, but the way she wrinkled her nose, I couldn't help it. "Seriously?" My shoulders shook as I laughed.

"Oh yeah. One kid that couldn't have been older than fourteen

asked me if I was into football players, while another one asked me to go grab something to eat with him."

"Wow, some pretty confident kids."

"Clearly," she laughed, the sound soothing to my ears. Her laugh was nothing like high squeaky giggles I was used to from women. It was husky—and incredibly sexy.

"So, how about you?" she asked, snapping me to attention. "How was your day? Get hit on by any underage kids?"

"Can't say that I did," I shook my head, still grinning.

Do I tell her who I am, or not?

Who knows how long we'd be stuck together in the enclosed space of the elevator. I knew I couldn't hide my face the whole time—not without coming across as a complete weirdo.

Scratching at my jaw, I sighed.

Best get it over with.

For a moment, I felt self-conscious as I reached up and took off my baseball cap. I quickly ran my fingers through my hair before I turned to face her.

I stayed silent, shoulders tense, as Josie got her first proper look at me. I tried not to fidget as I watched her eyes travel over my face, her lips parting slightly. It was strange—while I braced myself for the inevitable gasp and squeal of *'oh my gosh you're Wyatt Boone!'*, I found myself hoping she would be different. It seemed that every woman I met was either a puck bunny, or a hockey expert, or just excited to see me in person instead of on city billboards or magazine covers. Just once, I wanted to be *seen*.

So, I silently counted down as I waited for her reaction.

JOSIE

A light stubble shadowed Wyatt's jaw, like he'd skipped shaving this morning. His nose was a bit crooked, no doubt the result of several hockey-related breaks and his brown hair was tousled, the ends curled. What really drew me in were his eyes. Baby blues framed by luscious eyelashes held my steadfast gaze.

Of course I'd seen his image over the years; television commercials, magazines—his face was everywhere. He even laid claim to the title of Toronto's Sexist Man Alive. You'd have to be living under a rock to not know who he is. Yet, none of those did him justice. He was more attractive in person. Which was truly unfair, in my opinion.

When I failed to say anything, he spoke, sounding a bit curt and tense.

"Do you know who I am?"

For a moment I wasn't sure if the way he sat there, with his shoulders set and his arms folded, was arrogance. That he was used to women throwing themselves at him and expected the same from me. Or, that he hoped I wouldn't. I found him surprisingly hard to read. The last thing I was going to do was fawn all over him. It took more than amazing sports skills and good looks to make a girl's panties drop. This girl's at least.

As he cleared his throat, I realized I still hadn't answered him. "Of course I know who you are. I'm from Toronto." I raised my eyebrows at him. Thanks to my dad, I've always been an avid hockey fan. The two of us had spent many hours together watching every *Knights* game. It was our thing. Even if you weren't a hockey fan, it would be hard not to know who Wyatt Boone was.

Ever since entering the League at just 19, one of the youngest to do so, he'd been a big deal. A first-round pick with the Knights, he led the team to the semi-finals of the Cup Championship the first year. It was a huge deal.

"And?" His shoulders were so hunched they were almost up to his ears.

"And? Is this the part where I'm supposed to scream and throw my underwear at you?" I asked, genuinely wanting to know. He was acting like I was seconds away from launching myself at him. "I knew

who you were the moment you sat down," I admitted.

"The cap wasn't much of a cover, huh?" he asked, his eyebrows raised.

"Your bag has the Toronto Knights logo, and you introduced yourself as Wyatt. Not hard to put two and two together," I pointed out with a shrug. I swore I saw his cheeks flush as he looked down at his gym bag.

"Oh. Why didn't you say anything?"

"I was waiting for you to say something," I confessed. "At least now you can keep your cap out of your eyes."

"You seem really…chill about it," he sounded a little disappointed which made me chuckle.

"Sorry to disappoint. Do you want me to throw myself at you? I will if you want," I grinned.

Finally, he smiled, and I felt my heart flutter. "No, that's okay." Yet, he kept looking at me like he was still waiting for me to freak out. Watching him look so uncomfortable was amusing, but I decided to put him out of his misery.

"It is kind of insane that I'm stuck in an elevator with Wyatt Boone. But I'm not going to go all batshit crazy on you, I promise." I gave him a small smile, hoping he knew I was serious.

"I…thanks."

"It's nice to officially meet you, Wyatt Boone," I said, and the relief in him was palpable as his frown lightened and his shoulders relaxed.

"Nice to meet you, too."

While Wyatt appeared more relaxed, silence quickly fell over us once again as I tried to fight back the urge to stare at him.

"So, you grew up in Toronto?" he finally asked. Turning his cap over in his hands, he turned and looked at me, a slight hesitation in his eyes. Admittedly, if I was in his shoes I would have been the same way.

"I did. Well, on the outskirts of the city until I moved away for university."

"Oh nice! Where did you go to study?" he asked, his eyebrows raised, and I was surprised to see he seemed genuinely interested.

"Toronto University. I know, pretty standard, but I was offered a scholarship and couldn't pass up the full ride. How about you?"

"I actually went to York," he replied.

I gave an exaggerated gasp and clasped my hands to my face. "My rival school! I should have known!" I shook my head, my smile widening.

"Hey, not my fault York is a better school," he said, playfully tossing his cap in the air before catching it with one hand.

"You did *not* just say that."

“What? It’s the truth,” he shrugged, and I couldn’t take my eyes off the playful smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“But which school is the higher ranked in Toronto?” I raised my eyebrows at him. My alma mater prided itself on the prestigious ranking. As Wyatt grunted, I knew I was right. “It’s pretty cool that you got to go to university while playing hockey. That must have been hard.”

“It was exhausting, I won’t lie. Early morning practices, a day of classes and then practice again. My life pretty much revolved around either classrooms or the rink,” he chuckled at the memory. “Even if I was only there for a year.”

“It was obviously worth it though,” I said. “All that dedication got you where you are today.” I found myself wanting to find out about the man beyond all the publicity. There was something intriguing about him that made me want to know more about his life—away from the rink and the cameras.

“Do you ever think about what you would have done, if you didn’t play hockey?” I blurted before I could stop myself. Wyatt was quiet for a moment as my question hung in the air. “Truthfully?” he finally asked.

Nodding, I turned my body to face him, tucking my legs underneath me.

Wyatt let out a long sigh. “I’m not sure, to be honest. My life’s always revolved around hockey, for as long as I can remember. I grew up watching it and I was on the ice before I could even walk. Making it to the League was my dream–I hadn’t allowed the room to have any other real interests. Then I got hurt.” His brow darkened briefly, giving away a glimpse of grief that I was all-too familiar with.

The knowledge that came from knowing you could lose everything you’ve worked so hard for, in a split second. “Things have just been a bit…off, since” he said, and I noticed the look of surprise on his face, as though he wasn't used to being so honest with someone, especially a stranger. Getting stuck in an elevator will do that. It’s like confined spaces make you drop your guard.

“I get that. After an injury it’s mainly a mental game.”

“You sound like you have some experience with it,” he replied, and the way he looked at me made me feel like he wanted to see what it was underneath it all. To see what made me tick. It was a look I was unfamiliar with.

“I tore my ACL a few years back,” I confessed, and the memories flashed through my mind before I blinked them away.

Wyatt whistled. “Damn. That’s brutal.” He stretched his right leg out, as though recalling his own ACL injury I knew he’d gone through the year before. Everyone freaked out watching the star player injured

and carted off the ice.

While ACL tears can be common among professional athletes, it wasn't typically common among hockey players. Then again, all it took was to take a hit at just the right angle, and the ligament by the knee goes. It's painful and can take months to heal, even after surgery and physical therapy.

I remember watching it happen. Wyatt's injury was splattered all over the news and social media as sport analysts talked about the difficulties with making a comeback from that kind of injury. They asked the question everyone asked themselves. How would the team survive without Wyatt playing?

"It's a bitch," I agreed. "It took me a while to trust my leg again."

"How did you hurt it?" he asked, and unconsciously my hand drifted to my right leg and rubbed at my knee. Sometimes I swore I could still feel a phantom pain.

"Running track."

"You ran track?"

I nodded. "Yeah, back in high school and then into uni. I got hurt my junior year."

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

I waved off his apology. "It's fine. It feels like another lifetime ago. I'm sorry about your ACL, though."

"I take it you already knew about my injury?" As he ducked his head, it was obvious to me that he was uncomfortable talking about it.

"I did." I tried to keep my face neutral. I know better than anyone how annoying pity is. It must be worse when the whole world watched you get hurt. "I'm going to tell you a little secret that saved me," I said in a dramatic whisper as I leaned forward. "Baby aspirin and Pepper paste."

He raised an eyebrow. "Pepper Paste?"

I smiled and nodded. "Get some cayenne and mix it with either olive oil, coconut oil, or even water to make a paste and put it on your knee for thirty minutes."

Wyatt stared at me, his mouth agape, like I had three heads. "You're messing with me." He shook his head, his skepticism obvious as he leaned against the wall.

"It sounds weird, I know, but trust me. The baby aspirin is easier on your stomach than painkillers they prescribe, and I found it helped more anyway. The paste does wonders, even long after the injury has healed." I knew it sounded weird using a pepper paste but I swore by it. I couldn't tell you how it worked but it just did.

"Pepper Paste," Wyatt scoffed.

"Don't knock it 'til you've tried it," I dared. "And when it works, you can go on national television and tell the world that Josie Scott

was right," I grinned.

"National television?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Yep. You can even add a big sign if you'd like."

Wyatt laughed loudly, looking so free and at ease for a moment. It was damn sexy.

"A sign…noted."

JOSIE

"Hands down it's Fruity Pebbles," Wyatt declared. I shook my head in fierce disagreement.

"God, no. It's Cinnamon Toast Crunch."

"How can you say that?" he scoffed.

"Because it's the truth."

He flashed another handsome grin at me. "I think we need to educate you on cereals."

"There's no point when I'm already right," I shrugged playfully.

Wyatt under his breath as he shook his head, but he was smiling. I had to admit it was amusing that I was stuck in an elevator arguing about cereal with a big-time hockey player. We'd had a few food debates while killing time.

Seriously, though. What kind of person picks Fruity Pebbles over Cinnamon Toast Crunch? A crazy person that's who.

This was also the guy who'd already stated that tomatoes were gross but liked spaghetti.

Go figure.

"Think anyone's trying to find us?" I asked after a few minutes. We'd been stuck for three hours now, and still hadn't gotten any response through the elevator's emergency speaker. I'd lost almost all hope of someone rescuing us–I was just trying not to think about it.

"Maybe?" Wyatt answered, but there was no certainty in his tone.

Suddenly, I felt the need to get up and move around, and as I stood, I groaned softly as the muscles in my lower back ached from sitting on the floor for so long. I distracted myself by holding my phone up, willing it to register a connection. Extending my arm as far as I could above my head, I moved towards the corner of the elevator and froze as the reception bars shifted from zero to one.

"I got service!" I yelped, my voice sounding far too loud, but Wyatt didn't seem bothered by it as he gracefully got to his feet to look for himself. "Really?"

I nodded, but the moment I took a step, the bar dropped back to zero. "If I stay right here," I said, moving back a step, watching the service flicker.

"Think you can get a text out?" Wyatt asked.

“Maybe.” I raised myself onto my toes hoping it would help but my balance wasn’t great after so much sitting.

“Here, let me help.” Before I could say anything two strong hands grabbed my waist, hoisting me up. I froze, not expecting Wyatt to lift me in the air. Glancing down I saw the outline of his biceps under his jacket. My heart rate picked up at how easily he lifted me, like I weighed nothing at all.

Heat burned through my cheeks, and as I realized I was hanging there like a puppet, I quickly raised my phone again. I tried to ignore the feeling of Wyatt’s big hands wrapped around my waist. At how easily he was holding me up. The guy was a professional athlete, I really shouldn’t be surprised.

It took all of my willpower to focus on the phone as I moved my arm, trying to get better reception. As soon as a bar flashed on my phone, I quickly typed out a message, but every time I tried to send it the reception dropped out. I became distracted, worrying that I must be growing heavy in Wyatt’s arms, yet he showed no sign of struggle. After several attempts, I finally got the perfect angle and hit send.

“I think it worked!” I gasped, my arm trembling from holding it up for so long. The fact that all I’d had to do was hold up a phone while Wyatt held me up was a little lame. I really need to start going back to the gym.

Wyatt gently lowered me to the floor, and I felt a tug of regret as he removed his hands from my waist. I could feel my back sliding along his chest, and even though he wore a jacket, I swore I could feel his muscles tense against my back. My entire body flushed with the simple movement.

No! Now is not the time to get a crush on a stranger. A famous stranger at that.

I could feel the hesitation swell between us as we stood there, his hands still on my hips and his chest pressed against my back. His breath softly caressed my neck, sending a shiver of pleasure down my spine. Clearing his throat, he stepped back putting distance between us, and all too soon, Wyatt’s hands disappeared from my waist. I took a deep breath before I turned to face him, willing the redness to fade from my cheeks.

Silently I prayed the text went through, yet as I watched the screen intently, my phone pinged with the notification: *unable to send message.*

“Didn’t work,” I groaned.

Well, there goes that idea.

“It was worth a shot,” Wyatt said, rubbing the back of his neck. “We’ll try again later.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could say anything, my

stomach chose that moment to protest loudly. The sound seemed louder in the small elevator. Not eating all day had caught up with me. “Sorry,” I mumbled, embarrassed.

“Hold on, I think I have something.”

I watched as he reached for his bag. Squatting down he started rifling through it. Inside I could make out some clothes, shoes, tape and what looked like a puck or two. “Here we go,” he said as he held up a nutrition bar.

“A nutrition bar? Really?” I scrunched up my nose at it.

“I thought you were hungry,” he countered, sending me a pointed look.

“Yeah, but those taste like cardboard.” Which they did.

“And?” He waved it in front of my face.

Knowing that I wasn’t about to get a big juicy hamburger anytime soon, I let out a dramatic sigh. “Fine, nutrition bar it is,” I muttered.

“Don’t forget a half-drunk bottle of water.” Wyatt pulled it out from his bag.

I looked at it then at him. “How long has that been in there?”

Wyatt inspected the bottle a moment before shrugging.

Great. Judging from the dented look of the bottle it’s been in there awhile.

“It’s better than nothing. Here.” He extended them towards me as his own stomach grumbled.

“What?”

“You have it,” he offered. I was flattered that he’d offered me the only food he had, instead of eating it himself.

“No, I can’t,” I replied and shook my head.

“No? Josie just take it.” He tried to put it in my hand, but I moved it away.

“I’ll only accept it if you share it with me.”

“I’ll be fine. You eat it,” he said, more insistently.

“Wyatt, you played tonight. You must be starving!” I held up my hand as he tried to argue with me. “We’ll split it and the water. Deal?” There was no way I was taking no for an answer. Sure, I’d hardly eaten all day, but that was my own fault. He was the one who’d played a grueling hour of hockey.

We were locked in a stare-off, neither one of us giving in. Wyatt was about to learn firsthand how stubborn I can be. ‘*More stubborn than a mull,’* my dad always said. After another minute of intense glaring, he gave up. “Fine, deal,” he grumbled.

I grinned in triumph.

“Here.” He ripped open the nutrition bar and broke it, handing me one half. Holding it up in the dim lighting, I saw it didn’t look so bad after all. Nuts, oats and something else I couldn’t really see. “Cheers.”

Wyatt held out his half and I tapped it with mine.

"Cheers." I was still grinning as I took a small bite, wanting to savor it as much as I could. Who knew how long until we were rescued.

"How is it?" He asked as he took a bite of his own.

"Not bad. Still tastes like cardboard, but like fancy cardboard," I replied, pleased it wasn't as terrible as I'd anticipated.

"Perfect description," Wyatt laughed loudly, and once again, the sound washed over me like a gentle wave that settled deep into my bones.

I could hear that all day and never grow tired of it.

My face flushed with heat at the thought, and I ducked my head. Fortunately, Wyatt seemed oblivious, lowering himself back to the floor. I followed his lead, crossing my legs under me as I nibbled on the bar.

"I mean, it's no hamburger but it will do," I said quickly. He murmured his agreement, and we sat there side by side, eating our nutrition bars.

"Thanks," I said softly as I nudged his leg with my foot.

"Anytime."

"So, let me guess. You're a hockey player by day, but secretly rescue stranded girls in elevators by night?"

"Caught me." Wyatt's lip quirked up. "This is a side gig of mine."

"Like Batman." I tried to keep the smile from my face.

"I mean have you seen Batman and me in the same room together?" He gazed at me; an eyebrow raised. "Bruce Wayne…Wyatt Boone. Same letters."

"Wow!" I gasped dramatically. "The dots are connecting. Although, if you *were* Batman, you would have yanked those elevator doors open already."

"Maybe I'm saving my strength." We were both trying to keep our expressions serious but were slowly failing.

"Sounds plausible," I nodded. We stared at one another for a minute before the laughter won over.

"Here." Wyatt extended the water bottle towards me as I ate the rest of my bar.

"Thanks." I only took a sip before passing it back, trying to ignore the fact we shared the bottle, our lips touching the same part. I could feel the temperature starting to dip in the elevator. I was thankful I wore jeans and a sweater today. With November just starting we weren't fully into winter yet, so at least we were spared from being stuck in here in the dead of winter.

I found myself inching closer to Wyatt, the cold elevator floor seeping through my jeans. Needing to distract myself a little I turned

to him.

"So aside from your Batman secret, and the fact you have horrible taste in food," I paused, allowing myself a moment to look at him and take in his raised eyebrow. "What else does *the* Wyatt Boone like to do?"

"Saving lives isn't enough?" he said with a dramatic sigh, leaning his head against the wall.

"Nope."

"Honestly, I'm quite boring."

"I highly doubt it," I scoffed. Looking at the man sitting beside me, there was absolutely nothing about him that screamed boring. I mean, the fact he was a professional athlete was far more exciting than anything in my life.

"No, really. If I'm not playing, I'm either at practice, at the gym, or with my family."

"Wow, what a letdown," I teased. "I guess celebrities really are normal just like the rest of us."

"Sorry to disappoint you." Wyatt nudged me with his shoulder, and I felt a flutter in my chest as he flashed me a teasing smile.

"It *is* disappointing. How am I to survive now?" I tried not to look at him, his smile was doing all sorts of things to me. It was pointless though–I couldn't stop myself. I don't think anyone could resist a smile like Wyatt's.

"What about you?" he asked.

"Me?" I replied before I could stop myself.

Nice work. Like there's anyone else in here Josie.

"Yeah, you know, like do you make a habit of getting stuck in elevators?"

"Oh, totally. This is a weekly occurrence for me."

"Is that so? Am I your favorite knight in shining armor so far?"

"Well…" I rubbed at my chin. "You *did* give me something to eat so I guess that's a plus."

"And water. Don't forget the water."

"Oh, how could I?" I glanced at the almost empty bottle by my side as he chuckled.

"I haven't seen you around before," Wyatt said softly. "Did you just move into the building?"

"I moved in almost a year ago."

"Really? I'm surprised we haven't run into each other before now." He took the words right out of my mouth. Though the building was 15 stories high, it was still surprising we haven't seen one another at least once.

"If I'd known we shared the same building I could have spent this whole time stalking your apartment," I teased. I hoped he knew I was

joking and wouldn't actually stalk him. I wasn't one of those girls.

"Can't say I'd mind if I had a stalker as pretty as you."

"Does that line usually work on women?" I asked with a raised eyebrow.

His laughter echoed around us as he slapped the top of his thigh. "That was terrible wasn't it."

"It was right up there with the teen lines I scored this afternoon," I smiled, watching the way Wyatt ducked his head, seemingly embarrassed. "But thank you."

Like I care how cheesy his line was. It's not every day I get a compliment, let alone one from the likes of Wyatt Boone.

Wyatt didn't respond but he turned and looked at me. *Really* looked at me, his eyes running over my face as though he was trying to memorize it, and there was nothing I could do to stop the heat rising into my cheeks. Or the shiver that ran up my spine as his leg brushed up alongside mine.

"Here," Wyatt said as he reached into his bag and pulled out a long sleeve jersey. "It's slightly dirty," he held it out for me as he awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand. "But it's warm."

As I accepted the jersey I was surprised at how thick and soft it felt, and I was eager to put it on. I shuffled over a little so I wouldn't elbow him as I pulled the jersey over my head. It smelled like cologne with a faint hint of sweat, and I loved it. As weird as it sounds, I found when some guys sweated it smelled…weirdly good. Masculine. I pretended to adjust the neckline as I discreetly took another smell.

The sleeves were far longer than my arms, and the bulk of the jersey swam around me, but I didn't care. It was warm.

I can't believe I'm actually wearing Wyatt Boone's jersey.

While I'd pulled on the jersey, Wyatt had shoved his bag across the floor and was shaping it into a pillow as he stretched out across the floor. Glancing at him, my breath caught in my throat as I found him already staring at me. There was a muscle clenching and unclenching in his jaw, and his eyes seemed a shade darker.

"Better?" he asked, his voice sounding deeper and raspier.

"Yeah," I nodded, swallowing thickly. It was taking all of my effort to try and remain cool, calm and collected. I shivered again, but it had nothing to do with feeling cold and everything to do with him.

"Come here. If we stay close, our body heat will help keep us warm." Wyatt raised his arm and nodded for me to lay down beside him.

My hesitation lasted for just a split second before I scooted down beside him.

What the hell. Tonight's weird enough already, might as well go

along with it.

"So, body heat, huh?" I teased, hyper aware of his arm gently wrapped around my shoulders. "Hey, my mom raised me to be a gentleman."

My body had a mind of its own as I pressed closer into his side, curling into it. His hand moved slowly down my arm, sending shivers through me again before it came around my waist, resting on the curve of my hip.

I told myself the position we were in wasn't sexual by any means, yet, the feel of his firm, muscular body against mine made me want to curl around him like a cat. I blamed the dirty thoughts suddenly coming to mind on my lack of male attention over the past year.

Stop it, Josie! Now is not the time or the place!

The last thing Wyatt needed was another random girl lusting after him. He'd already mentioned the fangirl's he encountered and I didn't want to be just one more. Yet, as the seconds of silence ticked by, I could feel the exhaustion ebbing from both of us as we laid there in the quiet, and I found it increasingly difficult to keep my imagination in check.

"Tell me about your family," I found myself whispering.

"My family?"

"Yeah. What are they like?" I wasn't usually so inquisitive, especially with someone I'd just met. Maybe it was a combination of exhaustion and being stuck together that made it easier to lower my walls. Though for a moment I panicked, fearing he'd think I was nosy.

Wyatt didn't hesitate as he answered. "Well, my mom is amazing. She's literally the backbone of my family." I could hear the smile in his voice as he spoke. "Mom drove my brothers and I back and forth from school to the rink every single day, and still cooked dinner for us all when we got home. Which was no mean feat with hungry boys. If any of us needed anything she was there. Always." Wyatt's love for his mom was evident in his voice, and I could tell she meant everything to him.

"She sounds amazing."

"She is."

I wasn't sure how that happened, but my head now rested on his chest, my arm draped across his around his taut abdomen.

I can't believe the two of us are lying on the floor of an elevator, wrapped in each other's arms.

"How many brothers do you have?" I asked, trying to distract myself. "Two. Landon is the oldest. He's 28 and loves to parent me and my younger brother. Sometimes he comes off as an asshole, but he means well. He actually runs an ice-skating rink and trains kids and teenagers. Not to mention he also coaches the local little league

team."

"So, he plays ice-hockey too?" I asked.

"Yeah, we all do.

"He didn't want to go professional like you?" My mouth ran away from me as the questions poured out, but Wyatt didn't seem to mind.

"Nah, he never had the passion for it that I do, but he still loves it enough to want to coach and teach."

"And your younger brother?"

"Mateo. He turns 18 in a few weeks. That kid," He chuckled, and I could feel the vibration in my ear. "He never sits still. He plays hockey as well as football and he'd play more if he could, but my mom put her foot down at two sports. He's a good kid though."

I loved hearing him talk about his family. It was obvious they were close, really close. In a matter of minutes, I'd learned that Wyatt would move mountains for his family. It just made me respect him even more.

As he continued telling me about his brothers, I felt my eyes grow heavy as the day caught up with me. Wearing his jersey, and wrapped in his arms, I felt so warm and comfortable. Safe. I tried to fight the fatigue, but slowly his voice started fading and I drifted off to sleep.

JOSIE

I woke to someone softly shaking me. Groaning, I kept my eyes closed as I shook my head. “No, not yet” I swatted the offending hand away. “I’m still tired.” Yawning loudly, I only briefly registered the chuckle before whoever it was shook my shoulder again.

Why was someone waking me up so early on a Saturday? Weekends are meant for sleeping in.

“Josie,” said a soft, male voice. At the sound of my name, I groaned again, accepting sleep was not mine to have. I fought back the sleep as I slowly opened my eyes.

A male voice! Wait, what?

My eyes flew open, wide awake now as I stared at his chest, and everything rushed back.

I’m stuck in an elevator. With Wyatt Boone. And I just fell asleep on him. Oh god, I hope I didn’t drool all over him.

My cheeks burned as I jerked upright and scrambled away from him as I discreetly wiped at my mouth, hoping to God I hadn’t drooled on him.

I can’t believe I fell asleep on him. Could I be more embarrassing?

“Good morning,” Wyatt greeted as he sat up and ran his fingers through his hair. There was a sleepy look to his expression, and with his freshly tousled hair, he looked unbelievably good. Like he’d just stepped out of a photo shoot, not waking up on the floor of a stranded elevator.

Patting my hair, I could feel that it was a matted nest, and I groaned inwardly. I knew I looked rough first thing in the morning at the best of times. “Morning,” I replied softly. “Sorry for falling asleep on you last night.”

“Don’t be,” he waved me off. “I promise you didn’t do anything embarrassing.” It was like he read my mind. As I shuffled back up against the wall, I could feel an awkwardness building between us. Almost like it was the morning after a random hook-up.

“Were you able to sleep?” I asked, my fingers playing with the sleeves of the jersey I still wore. “I did. How about you?” I could feel the intensity of his gaze, but I couldn’t bring myself to meet it as I nodded.

Come on Josie say something!

As I opened my mouth, a gruff voice filtered through the elevator's speaker. I jumped, instinctively reaching for Wyatt's hand and gripping it tightly.

"Is anyone in there?" the voice asked. Wyatt and I shared a wide-eyed look before Wyatt shot forward on his knees and pressed the intercom button.

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

"Someone's in there," the person said as though speaking to someone else.

"Hello?" Wyatt tried again.

"Is it just you in there?" the voice replied.

"No, there are two of us." Wyatt looked at me as he spoke, squeezing my hand.

"Okay, hold tight. We are going to bring the elevator down in just a minute. There may be some resistance, but nothing to be alarmed about," the voice instructed.

"Sounds good," Wyatt replied. "Told you someone was coming." He turned to me with a smile. Shaking my head I grinned back. "Yes, you did."

We continued staring at one another, his eyes glued to mine, and I wondered if he was thinking the same thing I was. Only a matter of hours ago, the last thing I wanted was spending the night stuck in an elevator with a stranger. But now…well, if it had to be anyone, I was thrilled Wyatt was that stranger. What I originally thought was the start of the worst weekend ever had turned out better than I could have dreamed. Even if I never saw Wyatt again, I knew I'd always remember this. He got to his feet, my hand still in his as he pulled me up.

Suddenly, the elevator shifted, and fell against him. Yet, before I could apologize, Wyatt's arms were around me, keeping me steady as my heart raced. A mechanical, grinding sound echoed through the elevator, quickly followed by a series of jolts, and I felt the sudden fear that we would plummet all the way down the shaft. As though sensing my fear, Wyatt held me tighter against him as the voice spoke through the intercom again.

"Sorry about that. Will be just another minute."

The voice startled us out of our embrace, and we broke apart. Wyatt cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck as he turned away and I looked at my feet to hide my red face.

Silently, we gathered our things. While putting my purse on my shoulder I saw Wyatt put his baseball cap back on, as though marking the end of our time together. I realized that as soon as we stepped out of the elevator, our rescuer would recognize him.

They'd probably want a picture taken with him and ask a ton of questions about the game. I knew that losing the game hurt Wyatt more than he'd let on and having to face anyone else was the last thing he wanted—or needed.

"When we reach the bottom, you slip away to the stairs. I'll handle everything else," I instructed as the elevator began a steady descent.

"What? Josie no I…"

"Wyatt, it's okay. Seriously," I said, placing my hand on his arm, silencing his protests. "The moment those doors open, you'll be recognized, and I know the last thing you want is to have to talk to anyone right now. Especially since you look like you just spent the night sleeping in an elevator." I teased, scrunching my nose at his appearance. As he rolled his eyes, I knew my comment had the desired effect.

"If you're sure?"

"Really I don't mind." And I truly didn't.

As the floor numbers moved closer to the lobby, I squeezed his arm one last time.

"When the doors open, I'll distract them with what happened, and you can slip past and head over to the stairs on the right," I instructed.

Wyatt looked down at me, his expression unreadable. "Thank you, Josie."

"Anytime," I smiled. "And don't forget the pepper paste," I added as he smiled back and the elevator doors opened.

The bright lights of the foyer startled me, but I didn't waste any time nudging Wyatt out of the elevator as several people gathered around. I was taken aback by the crowd and was glad Wyatt and I had had the foresight to come up with a plan. It seemed like news of the tenants stuck in the elevator had spread throughout the building. All at once, the questions came as they talked over each other, eager to know what happened.

"How long were you in there?"

"Are you injured?"

"What happened?"

I was only vaguely aware of them as I cast a discreet glance towards the staircase, catching a glimpse of Wyatt's broad shoulders as he disappeared. Staring at the empty stairs, I hoped it wouldn't be the last time I saw Wyatt Boone.

JOSIE

Thankfully, the building manager ushered the onlookers away, but it still took another half hour or so to answer his questions as I sat on one of the foyer chairs with a blanket around my shoulders and a hot cup of coffee in my hands. I watched the maintenance crew as they propped the elevator doors open and got to work.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Miss Scott, but wasn't there someone else in the elevator with you?" the building manager asked. I stared into my coffee, knowing I didn't have the best poker face.

"Yeah, there was, but we kept to ourselves. I'm not even sure of his name," I lied. I felt bad, but I wanted to keep my promise to Wyatt. Sure, I didn't know if I'd ever see him again, yet I wanted him to know that he could trust me, that I wasn't going to cash in on my fifteen minutes of fame by selling him out. Besides, I didn't want to share the time we spent together with anyone. It already felt like a strange, yet wonderful, dream.

"Now are you sure we can't get you some medical attention?" the business manager asked, though I could tell by his tone that he asked because he had to. It seemed like I wasn't the only one that just wanted to get on with my day.

"Really, I'm fine. I just want to head up to my apartment and take a shower."

The manager nodded quickly. "Yes, of course. By all means." He stepped aside and I got to my feet, holding out the blanket and cup.

"If there's anything you need, please call down. And again, I'm profusely sorry for what happened."

"Thank you," I replied with a tired smile.

If only he knew how much I enjoyed my evening with Wyatt.

There was no way I was tempting fate by getting in another elevator, and so despite my fatigue, I headed up the stairs. By the fourth flight of stairs, I began regretting my decision. There were still four flights to go, and I was exhausted. My back hurt from laying on the floor of the elevator all night, and I longed to take a hot shower and crawl into my soft bed.

Thank God it's Saturday and I don't have to work.

Finally, I stood in front of my apartment, unlocking my front door.

I slipped inside and closed it behind me with a sigh.

Home sweet home. Finally.

I dropped my camera and handbag on my counter and dragged my feet to my bedroom. Kicking my shoes off in the corner I went over and plugged my dead phone onto the charger, eyeing my bed from the corner of my eye. As much as I wanted to sleep, I needed a shower more.

In the bathroom paused as I took in my appearance. I looked a total mess, and I groaned aloud at what Wyatt had witnessed.

Good luck ever seeing him again!

Though, there was a silver lining to the situation as I ran my fingers along the edge of Wyatt's jersey. With everything going on, I'd forgotten I was wearing it. I guess it didn't seem odd that out of the ordinary given there was a game last night. Pulling it over my head, I realized I'd have to return it at some stage, and the thought of seeing Wyatt again made my heart flutter. Don't get me wrong–I knew nothing would ever happen between us. I mean, look at the guy. Women literally threw themselves at him. At least I could see him one last time before we went our separate ways.

Right?

Stepping into the shower, the warm water felt heavenly after the past 24-hours. Yet as I let the water cascade over me, all I could think about was Wyatt Boone.

That smile.

His voice.

Those eyes.

He was so unexpected. I felt sympathy towards him after the way he'd talked about hockey. It was clear the game meant everything to him and his injury continued to haunt him. Over the months there had been talk among hockey fans about Wyatt's return to the game after his injury—and how he wasn't at his best.

I knew this but hadn't considered the effects it had on Wyatt himself, and hearing the anger, hopelessness and frustration in his voice saddened me. While I knew what it's like to sustain an injury doing what you love, it was nowhere the same level as Wyatt. Yet, he didn't strike me as the type to give up easily. I knew he'd bounce back.

Looking down at my pruney fingers, I realized Wyatt had consumed my thoughts far longer than I thought. I knew if I stood there any longer thinking about him, I would end up doing something I shouldn't. So, instead, I turned off the shower and stepped out into the steaming bathroom, wrapping a towel around me.

Padding barefoot back into my bedroom I was about to head to my dresser when my phone started ringing. I smiled at the familiar

ringtone, knowing who it was without having to check the screen. Clicking the speaker button, I continued getting dressed as I answered.

"Hello?"

"I've been trying to call you since last night! Where've you been, woman?" The voice of my best friend, Tasha Davis, echoed loudly around my room.

"Sorry it's been a…weird morning," I replied, rummaging through my drawers for something to wear.

"Oh! Did someone have a fun night?" I didn't have to see her to know she was wiggling her eyebrows at me. "Please tell me there's a hot, tall, half-naked man in your kitchen right now, making breakfast."

"He's actually fully naked."

"Josie Scott, you little ho."

I couldn't help but laugh as I pulled on an old, oversized shirt, the fabric falling to my knees.

"You have no idea! We actually just finished having wild sex in the shower."

"You're such a little liar!" Tasha yelled, but I could hear the amusement in her voice, and laughed aloud. No one knew me better than Tasha, and she knew the chances of there being a naked man in my apartment was next to zero.

"Sorry, I couldn't help myself," I said, pulling on a pair of leggings.

"I'm just sorry it's not true. That would have made our weekly Saturday gossip session fun."

Tasha and I met in freshman year as roommates at uni, and ever since we've had a weekly ritual. Every Saturday morning, no matter what, we'd tell each other what's happened during the week. When we lived together, we used to sit at the table with coffee. Now that we live apart, we either meet up at a coffee shop or talk on the phone.

"So sorry to disappoint." I could practically hear her shaking her head at me. "Give me a sec!" I yelled as I went into the bathroom and hung up my wet towel. "So, how's Florida?" I asked, flopping down on my bed.

"It's okay. I'm so ready to come home this week, though." Tasha had spent the past two weeks at her parents' vacation home in Florida, and despite her eagerness to come home, it was a much-needed weekend after the last few months she'd had.

"It feels like you've been gone for ages," I sighed. Being without your best friend for a few weeks might as well be a lifetime. Especially for Tasha and me. If we weren't at work, we were hanging out together, along with my boss and other friend Lydia.

"The sun's nice here though. I've got a great tan," she said.

"Oh yeah, not missing the cold?"

“God no. You should’ve come with me. Every blonde needs her brunette best friend by her side.”

“Next time, I promise,” I said, lying back against my pillows and moving the phone closer. “Tell me more about Florida.” Usually, I would jump at the chance to tell Tasha as soon as something happened, yet I found myself keeping the elevator incident to myself. I just wanted to keep it between Wyatt and I, for now at least. Though I knew Tasha would be pissed at me when she discovered I’d kept it from her.

“You won’t believe it, but I saw a dolphin yesterday,” Tasha said, and I smiled, absently closing my eyes as I listened to her. Without meaning to, I slowly drifted off to sleep, the face of Wyatt Boone filling my dreams.

WYATT

“Hold on, you were stuck in an elevator all night with some random girl?” Max, one of my teammates asked. I nodded, lacing up my skates. “Did you sleep with her?”

I was in the middle of telling my best friends about being stuck in an elevator Friday when Max over heard and announced it to the whole team. It resulted in quite a bit of teasing until they learned I hadn’t been alone. Then of course came the questions and jeers as the rest of the team gathered around.

Around us others leaned in to listen.

“So? Did you?” Max nudged me with his elbow.

“You know you can talk to a woman without sleeping with her right?” I shot him a look.

“Don’t tell me you spent all night with a woman and didn’t make a single move on her?” Trevor raised an eyebrow, surprised.

“Was she ugly?”

“Tits too small?”

With each taunt from my teammates, I clenched my jaw tighter until I could feel my teeth grinding together. Usually, I didn’t mind the taunts of the team, but for some reason, hearing them say things about Josie just pissed me off.

“Come on, bro. Don’t hold out on us!”

Suddenly, I stood, my hands clenched at my sides, as I glared at them. “Shut the fuck up. I don’t want to hear another word out of your mouth about her.”

“Bro, chill we were just playing.” Max held his hands up as my teammates exchanged glances. Immediately, I knew it looked like I’d overreacted—there was no reason why the conversation should have pissed me off as much as it did. It’s what happens in the locker room. Someone comes in talking about the latest person they slept with and the rest of us prod and tease. But Josie wasn't like any of those girls. She didn’t deserve being talked about in the locker room with twenty-three horny men.

“Whatever,” I mumbled, grabbing my stick and helmet before storming out of the looker room. To be honest, I’d never really cared for talking girls and our sexploits—my mom raised me better than

that. I didn't know what it was about Josie, but I felt protective towards her, and even though I knew I might never see her again, I felt that there was something special about our night together.

"This girl really has you in knots," said my other best friend, Bryton, as he slapped me on the back. I didn't need to look back to know Trevor was also right there. I just grunted in response.

Fuck. He's right.

Three days had passed since the elevator, and I'd thought about her nonstop. Every few minutes her face would pop into my head, that smile that could make any man fall to his knees, those eyes that could see into your soul. It was driving me crazy, and it was the last thing I wanted to talk to the team about.

"Can you at least tell us if you've seen her since?" Trevor asked as the three of us skated onto the rink. I shook my head, focusing on the sound of my skates cutting across the ice. Just stepping foot on the rink brought me a sense of calm. As if it was an old friend wrapping its arms around me, welcoming me home.

"Why not? Don't you want to see her again?"

"I do, that's the problem," I grunted. "How is that a problem?" Bryton asked, falling in sync alongside me as we began our warm-up laps.

"Because I left her there that morning. As soon as the elevator doors opened, I ran out like a dog with its tail tucked between its legs while she dealt with the manager and the onlookers," I confessed, the words slipping from my lips before I could stop them. I felt like shit as I said it out loud—It was stupid, but it was a blow to my pride. I should have manned-up and stood by her side, not disappear up to my apartment like a pussy.

Who knows what she must think of me now.

"But you said she told you to leave, that's not your fault," Trevor tried to reason but I shook my head.

"It's a cop out. I should have stayed–who cares if anyone recognized me." I hated to admit it, but I was embarrassed that I walked away so easily. Josie gave me an out, and I took it without a second thought. All I've wanted to do for the past three days was find Josie and apologize.

I'd worked out from the button she'd pushed in the elevator that she lived on the eighth floor, and it took all my willpower to not go down and knock on every door until I found hers. It was the fear that she wouldn't want to see me that held me back.

Bryton pulled up to a sudden stop in front of me, and I quickly pushed the blade of my skate into the ice to brake.

"Look, Wyatt, it seems to me this girl knew you didn't want anyone to recognize you. She did you a favor by making you leave.

But now, she probably thinks you're an asshole."

"What?" I scowled.

"Well, have you tried to find her since the elevator?" Bryton asked. "You know, to say thanks."

"No, but…"

"I agree with Bry," Trevor piped up. "You could have tried to track her down. I mean, you live in the same apartment building, how hard can it be? How long's it been?"

"Three days," I muttered.

"See?" Bryton continued. "Now I bet she regrets helping you out. I would have thrown you to the wolves." I punched him in the arm, but he and Trevor only laughed.

I didn't want to admit it, but I knew they were right, and I was kicking myself for not doing something sooner.

"All we're saying is do something about it soon before she slips through your fingers," Bryton as he playfully returned my punch.

I will.

"Since when did the two of you become wise about women?" I joked, shoving past the two of them.

"We've always been wise, you've just never listened," Bryton smirked. Since he was the only one of us with a girlfriend, maybe he was the wiser.

With fresh resolve I was determined to call the superintendent after practice, and find out what apartment she lived in.

"Thanks." I didn't need to say anything more than that—they were my best friends; they knew what I meant without me needing to say it.

We were almost done with our laps when I heard my name bellowed across the rink. Inwardly, I winced. I'd hoped Coach would let Friday slide.

"Oh, good luck," Bryton patted my shoulder before he and Trevor took off, leaving me to deal with the wrath of Coach. With a sigh, I skated towards him, knowing the sooner we got this conversation over, the better.

Coach stood behind the barrier; his arms crossed over his stocky chest. To say Coach Barnum was intimidating as hell was an understatement. He played in the League years ago and became coach of the Knights a few years before I joined the team. At 60, he was still in great shape. If his 6'2 frame wasn't intimidating enough the scowl on his face was. I swear he could make a man want to bury himself with his expression. And right now, it was directed at me. It's been a while since I was on the receiving end of it.

And I wanted to bury myself.

"Coach," I greeted.

"Do we need to talk about what happened Friday?" I raised my

eyebrows. I'd expected a roasting over the game, but something about his tone told me that wasn't what he was talking about.

"Uh, what part?" I asked.

"How about the fact you left without a word to anyone. You know it's a contractual obligation for the players to talk to reporters after a game. Instead, you left your teammates hanging."

I knew I was in some pretty deep shit. After the game I was so caught up in my own head that I hadn't considered the team.

"Sorry Coach I…"

"If you do it again you are benched for three games. Got it?" Coach cut me off.

I nodded—I knew better than to talk back. "Get your head out of your ass, Boone."

"Yes, Coach."

With that, he turned and stomped off towards the other end of the rink. With a long sigh, I leaned against the barrier, knowing it was no idle threat. Coach was a man of few words, but when he spoke, we all knew to pay attention. Besides, he was right. I needed to get my head out of my ass.

"Mathews, Perkins, Hall and Young you're up!" Coach yelled. Beside me, Trevor and Bryton hopped over the boards and onto the ice. Because of our horrible losing streak, Coach decided that torture was the best method for today's practice. We'd already sweated through an hour worth of drills, and by the looks of it, we were now about to have four on four scrimmages.

While I waited for my turn on the ice, I stretched out my knee and watched my teammates play. When I was younger, I thought I could play solo. That as long as *I* played well that's all that mattered. I didn't need to focus on my teammates—just the game. Thankfully, I soon realized how far from the truth that was.

You can be an incredible player but if you don't learn your team, don't learn how they move and play, you won't win. The perfect time to do that was at practices. While sitting on the sidelines you can watch their feet work, how they move the puck, what side of their body they prefer when shooting. There's something…magical when you click with your teammates.

On the ice, we had to be a close-knit group. We feed off each other. It was important to think like your teammates as you raced down the ice. We had to play as one, and if any player was off their game, then the whole team was too.

For thirty minutes, the first group of four played on the ice, Coach occasionally barking out names and plays. By time he called them off the ice they were all breathing hard.

When Coach turned and looked down at me, I knew I was in for it.

“Boone, Jekin, Lukugv, Lewis!”

When I hopped the boards I took a few deep breaths, knowing I needed to focus. It may be practice, but what we do here reflects on game day—and I had to prove myself. As Captain of the team, it was my job to make sure we were a well-oiled machine. I knew I needed to play better than I had—I owed it to my team.

The honor of becoming Captain this year was a huge deal. Someone my age typically doesn’t get the privilege. It usually goes to one of the older guys on the team with more experience. I made a vow to be the best Captain the Knights have seen and I wasn’t about to break that now.

I lined up against my ‘opposing’ teammate, anchoring my skate into the ice. With one last deep breath I centered myself. As soon as the puck was live, I took off after it. I was known for my speed and ability to make a shot regardless of the situation. I could have four guys on me and still find a small space to smack the puck. It was second nature, I just had to get back to playing like I was before the injury. Something that was harder than I imagined it would be.

I pushed aside thoughts of my injury and how badly I’d played since my return. Instead, I focused on practice and pushing myself harder, hoping in some way, it helped make up for our shitty playing. I knew I wasn’t the only one at fault for our losing streak. We lose as a team. We win as a team. But that did little to ease the feeling that I was the one at fault.

By the time Coach blew his whistle I was breathing hard and sweating. I may have pushed myself a tad bit too hard for just a scrimmage but as I skated my way back to the bench my teammates each patted me on the back. I gave them a nod, trying to down-play how happy that made me as I took a seat on the bench. Fixing my pads, I tried to slow my breathing as the next set of four went out onto the ice.

“You were playing pretty hard there. Thinking of a certain someone?” Trevor nudged me.

“Maybe he got laid after all, and he's been holding out on us,” Bryton added.

“Oh, fuck off,” I growled, as Trevor started making dirty hand gestures. I rolled my eyes.

“Boys.” All it took was one word from Coach to shut us all up. We were all grown-ass men but none of us were going to correct him calling us that. I rammed my elbow into Trevor’s side for getting us in trouble.

When the last scrimmage was called to an end, I had a small amount of hope we were done for the day. Then Coach said one word that brought those hopes crashing down.

Suicides!"

The entire team let out a chorus of groans but one hard look from Coach shut us right up. Setting our sticks down we all made our way to the far side of the ice.

I'm definitely going to feel this.

"You will go back and forth until I say otherwise. If one person gets left behind, we start over." Without another word Coach blew the whistle. As one we all pushed off the ice and skated for the other side.

I purposely kept my pace a little slow, not going full out, with Trevor and Bryton on either side of me. We all knew we'd be there awhile.

My skates cut through the ice with a satisfying sound, pieces of ice flying as I angled the blade sideways to slow down a little, before pivoting and shooting back the way I came. Each pass had my lungs straining against my chest. My thighs burned after the tenth pass, but I welcomed it. I think on some level, professional athletes were masochists. Why else would we put our bodies through pain over and over again.

After twenty-five passes, we all started showing our fatigue, each of us breathing heavily. This was definitely punishment for how shitty we'd played. I couldn't recall the last time Coach pushed us this time.

By the thirtieth pass, I was done for. As I was about to tempt fate and signal for Coach to call it, he suddenly blew the whistle. Instantly the sounds of blades on ice came to an abrupt stop. A few guys buckled onto the ice, rolling onto their backs as they tried to catch their breath. Others moved to the sideboards looking either ready to pass out or throw up. Or both.

Knowing if I didn't keep moving my legs would seize, I took a slow lap around the rink. Sweat ran down from under my helmet, down the back of my jersey and my face. I longed for a hot shower.

Spotting a row of fresh water bottles on the sideboards I made my way over, instantly squeezing the bottle through my face guard and into my mouth. I guzzled the water, reveling in how good it was after such an intense session. My legs burned. No doubt we'd all be sore tomorrow.

Lowering the water bottle, I noticed the sudden change of conversation next to me.

"I think someone is lost."

"Are the cheerleaders holding tryouts?"

"Damn."

Curious, I pushed off the board and turned around. It took a second for me to work out what everyone was talking about…or more like who.

Josie.

WYATT

Am I really that gone that I'm imagining her now?

I blinked, half expecting to find she was an illusion. But no, she was really here. The lighting in the practice rink wasn't the greatest but despite the shitty lights Josie looked beautiful.

I watched her look around, tucking her hair behind her ears like she wasn't sure if she should be here. I couldn't deny that I was curious as to how she got in, considering it was a private training arena.

How did she get past security?

"Are you lost, sweet cheeks?" One of my teammates called out, and Josie's head snapped towards the ice, taking in the entire team before her eyes landed on me.

I found myself skating across the ice before I realized what I was doing. Pulling my helmet off, I shook my head, loosening the sweaty hair stuck to my forehand. Our eyes met, with her wide, brown eyes and flushed cheeks. Nothing could wipe the smile from my face.

Fuck…she looks even prettier than she did in the elevator.

Then again, the light was better here than in the elevator and I felt like I was seeing her properly for the first time. I skidded to a stop at the edge of the ice, running my gaze over her as she walked towards me.

Once again, she was wearing a tight pair of jeans that looked like they were glued to her long, sculpted legs. The thick green sweater she wore looked comfy and warm. Today her brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail, showing off her cheekbones and the light freckles across her nose.

"Hi." Her voice brought me out of my awkward staring.

"Hi," I returned the greeting. It felt surreal seeing her again, almost like I'd imagined our encounter in the elevator.

"Sorry for barging in like this, I hope I didn't interrupt anything." Her eyes drifted behind me, no doubt the entire team stood there watching us. They weren't exactly discreet.

"You're totally fine. Practice just finished anyways."

"I can tell." A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. I ran a hand through my sweaty hair and held back a grimace. Here I was,

standing in front of her, sweating like a pig, while she stood there looking gorgeous.

"I—"

"What—" We said at the same time. Laughing, I gestured for her to go first. "After you."

"I hope it isn't too weird that I just showed up. I'd thought about asking the apartment building manager your apartment number, but I figured he wouldn't tell me. So then I considered coming here, but didn't want to look like a stalker." She smiled wryly as she rambled.

"But then I figured, what the hell? I knew you guys practiced here, so I took the chance. Which now seems way more stalker-ish now that I'm standing here." A smile formed on my face as I watched her talk, remembering that she'd told me she was prone to ramble until someone stopped her, but I enjoyed the sound of her voice.

"It's not stalker-ish, I promise," I managed to say, before she could speak again, and her cheeks flushed again. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her I'd considered doing the same, but I held back. I silently thanked whoever it was up there for bringing her to the rink.

"I just wanted to return this." It was only then I noticed my jersey in her arms–I'd forgotten I'd given it to her in the elevator. She held it out for me. "I washed it, I hope that's okay. Didn't know if you had some sort of ritual with it or not."

I chuckled under my breath. A lot of guys do have superstitions about not washing their jerseys. Thankfully I wasn't one of them.

"Thank you." I reached for the jersey, but before I could grab it, someone else swiped it from her. My head snapped to the side to find Trevor standing there, grinning like a fool.

"Well, hello. Who do we have here?" He looked between Josie and I, a mischievous look in his eye that I knew too well. Sighing, I introduced them. "Trevor, this is Josie. Josie, this is my dumbass friend, Trevor."

"Don't forget about me," another voice piped in. Glaring, I turned to Bryton. Of course, these two just had to come over and butt in.

"I'm Bryton, this asshole's other best friend." He shoved me with his shoulder, grinning widely at Josie. I glared at my two best friends before turning to Josie. She stood there smiling at the three of us.

"It's nice to meet you." Her smile eased the tension from my shoulders–tension that steadily built up over the past three days.

I quickly glanced over my shoulder to make sure no one else was coming up behind us but most of the team were making their way off the ice. Probably courtesy of the two guys beside me.

"I see you have his jersey," Trevor said, and I turned back to see him holding it up.

"Figured I'd better return it before someone thinks I stole it." The

cheeky grin she gave me almost made me melt into a puddle.

"So, I'll take it you're the girl from the elevator," Bryton butted in a second later.

"That would be me."

I wanted to smack my forehead.

Great, now she knows I'd talked about her.

I really needed to get Josie away from my friends. Instead of making me look good they were doing the opposite.

So much for being my wingmen.

"When Wyatt told us he got stuck in an elevator with a pretty girl we didn't believe him." Trevor leaned against the side board, a flirty smile on his face.

Josie flushed under his gaze. It was the Trevor Hall effect. He could charm any woman with a single glance. Usually it didn't bother me, but right now, I wanted nothing more than to smack that smile off his face.

Both Trevor and Bryton looked at me with matching grins, and I just knew they were going to say something stupid.

"You should have seen this guy today," Bryton started. "He was a hot mess thinking about you."

"He almost started crying and he's not an attractive crier either," Trevor added.

"Then there was the whole 'woe is me' situation in the locker room."

Josie listened to my two best friends with a raised eyebrow, lips twitching. I knew I had to put an end to this before the two assholes went any further with their lies.

"Okay, that's enough." I placed my hands on their shoulders and gave them a nudge. "Time for you to go."

"But we want to get to know Josie better!" Trevor protested, but I tightened my grip. "She clearly wants to talk to us more than you," he added, winking at her. As Josie giggled, I felt my jaw clench.

"Yeah, come on Wyatt." Of course Bryton had to egg him on. Glaring, I pushed them towards the tunnel to the locker room.

"Fine, fine, we're going." Freeing himself from my grip, Trevor skated backwards, looking at Josie. "Nice to meet you."

"Hopefully we see you again." Bryton gave her a wave.

"Nice to meet you, too," Josie called out, smiling at the two idiots. I shook my head at my best friends as they finally skated away. Not before wiggling their eyebrows at me. "Sorry about them." I rubbed the back of my neck as I turned around to face her.

"No worries, they seem really nice."

"They're shit stirrers," I mumbled. "Don't believe a word they say."

"Oh, so you weren't crying in the locker room?" Josie teased.

Seeing the way her eyes lit up, I suddenly didn't care what my friends said.

"Someone was cutting onions in there," I teased back. It dawned on me I couldn't remember the last time I'd had such easy banter with someone of the opposite sex. It was nice.

"Well, I better let you go. I just wanted to drop by and return the jersey." She took a step back. As her eyes met mine and I couldn't deny the spark of something in my chest. "I'll…uh, see you around." She turned on her heel and walked away.

The sight of her leaving made my stomach sink. I couldn't let her walk away, not after she just got here. It had been three days of battling with myself, wanting to see her, and now I had my chance. I couldn't let the opportunity slip through my fingers. Not like I did in the elevator.

"Wait," I called out before she could take another step. She stopped, slowly turning back around to face me.

"Are you free right now?" The words slipped out before I could stop them.

This was not really what I'd had in mind when I thought about seeing her again. Standing here in my bulky hockey gear with sweat dripping off my face. Thought I'd at least look presentable.

"Yeah, I'm free." I could hear the question in her voice.

"Want to go grab something to eat?" I couldn't stop the hopeful tone in my voice.

Please say yes.

Josie stood there for a full minute without saying a word. Right when I thought she'd say no, she answered. "You do owe me a hamburger."

A wide smile spread across my face at the mention of our conversation over an old nutrition bar. "I do."

She grinned right back at me, the smile lighting up her entire face.

"I'll be out in five minutes," I said. "Wait for me?"

"Okay," Josie nodded. Not wanting to waste another second, I gave her one last smile before pushing off the board and skating across the ice towards the locker room. I was going to regret not stretching and cooling off properly, but I had something more important waiting for me.

JOSIE

"Sorry to make you wait," Wyatt said as soon as he came around the rink. I wasn't sure what to do or where to go, so I stood there awkwardly, waiting until Wyatt was ready. The Zamboni driver kept giving me side glances the entire time as he cleaned the ice after the teams practice.

"No worries," I replied with a quick shake of my head. Once again, he wore a pair of track pants that made my mouth water. Something about guys in track pants was insanely attractive. He wore a simple gray Nike sweatshirt over it, and though the outfit was simple, he looked damn good. Feeling myself blush, I pushed the thoughts aside as I looked at him.

"Where do you want to eat?" I asked.

"I actually know of a good burger place not too far from here. That okay?"

"Sounds perfect." The sound of a good hamburger made my stomach growl, and I silently prayed he didn't hear it. Judging from his chuckle, he did.

"I know we could just meet there, but how do you feel about riding in my car?" His blue eyes met mine as he spoke. "I promise to keep both hands on the wheel."

I thought it was sweet of him to ask, and I had the feeling if I said no, he'd respect my decision. It made me want to say yes, all the more.

"Seeing as you could have killed me in the elevator, I think spending a few minutes alone in your car won't hurt."

"I don't know…maybe it was all an act, and I'm now about to lure you into my trap," Wyatt said with a nonchalant shrug.

"Let me eat my burger first. Then you can kill me. Deal?" I smiled up at him.

"Fair enough. Gotta let you have your last meal. Would be brutal of me to kill you with an empty stomach," he laughed, leading us out of the practice arena towards the parking lot.

"Such a gentleman."

We walked side by side out to the parking lot. With every step, the side of his arm brushed against mine. Despite our clothes, I swore I

felt a tingle at his touch.

My eyes grew wide as Wyatt led me towards a sleek gray Tesla. It looked like it just came off the sales lot. Interesting he had a Tesla and not something a bit flashier. I was kind of expecting him to be driving a super expensive car like the Ferrari parked further down.

Good thing we didn't take my car.

I grimaced at the thought. My run-down Hyundai was nothing compared to this.

"Nice car," I commented as we reached it.

"Thanks. It's actually the first brand new car I've ever bought." Wyatt rubbed the back of his neck, a gesture I'd seen a few times now–one I was fairly sure meant he felt nervous. "Until a year ago, I drove an old, beat-up Ford truck that I bought for 1200 dollars," he explained.

"1200 dollars, huh?" The corner of my lip quirked up. Don't really expect a hockey star like him to be driving a cheap, beat-up truck. Especially when his contract is worth at least 12 million dollars. I liked that he was humble enough to keep driving it even if he could easily afford five cars.

"And still runs like a champ," he grinned back.

"Still?"

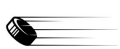
"My younger brother drives it now." Like a gentleman he opened the door for me. I slid into the passenger seat and was instantly hit with the same smell from the elevator.

A smell that was all Wyatt. Albeit less sweaty and more wintery.

Marveling at how comfortable the seat was, I ran my hands along the seat. I was surprised at how big the car actually was. The dark brown leather seats and black dashboard suited Wyatt—everything about the interior screamed masculinity.

As Wyatt slid into the driver's seat, I quickly stopped my gawking. "Ready?" he asked with a smile as he started the engine.

"Ready."



WHEN WYATT SAID he knew a good burger joint, I thought he meant an actual restaurant. Not a food truck parked out the front of Kmart. For a moment, I thought he was joking, but as he turned the ignition off, I knew he was dead serious.

"I promise you they have *the* best hamburgers in Toronto," he said, as though sensing my uncertainty. As I got out of the car, I saw there were a few tables around the food truck. There were only a few people

standing around, but then again it was only 4:30 on a Monday afternoon.

Wyatt led me towards the food truck, his hand on my lower back. It was a simple action, yet my back tingled at his touch. His hand was so big I could feel it spanning up my spine. The thought of those big hands touching me elsewhere flashed in my mind before I quickly cast it aside, hoping he couldn't see my face turning red.

Before we reached the truck, I could smell the food, making my mouth instantly water. The menu was filled with so many kinds of burgers, different styles of fries, as well as dessert.

I was so busy looking at the menu I didn't notice someone had popped their head out of the window until a booming voice called out Wyatt's name. My head snapped up to find an older man with gray-streaked hair and a bushy beard covering half his face, beaming down at Wyatt.

"My boy! Been awhile since I've seen you." The guy's eyes landed on me. "And I see you brought someone with you."

Wyatt's hand pressed into my lower back a bit more as he introduced me. "Josie, this is Rick. He owns the truck and cooks the best burgers in town." The last part was directed at Rick who just laughed.

"The kid isn't wrong. Nice to meet you, Josie."

"Nice to meet you," I smiled, already liking him.

"What can I get you two today?"

Wyatt looked at me, waiting patiently for me to go first. I wasn't sure what to pick so I just quickly rattled off the first option that came to mind.

"I'll take the bacon cheeseburger with fries and a water, please." I turned to Wyatt, and as I saw him raise his eyebrows at my order, I worried I'd said the wrong thing.

"I see—Wyatt recommended his favorite, did he?" Rick winked.

"Uh, no, I didn't," Wyatt replied, and I thought I saw a little twinkle in his eyes.

"I think this one's a keeper," Rick said, and I felt myself blush again. "You kids go take a seat, and I'll bring it out to you when it's ready." Rick disappeared through the window.

"Your usual huh? Come here often?" I asked as the two of us headed for an empty table off to the side. It occurred to me that Wyatt didn't seem concerned about concealing his identity here, and I hoped it meant he felt comfortable around me.

"You could say that. I actually found this place by accident. After my first game with the Knights, the entire team went out to celebrate and I may have drunk a little more than I should have. I stumbled out of the bar and just started walking, with no idea where I was going."

I fought back a grin imagining a drunk Wyatt stumbling around.

“I ended up coming across a food truck that was still serving food at two in the morning. I met Rick and he made me something to eat, free of charge since he had watched me play earlier. It was love at first bite.”

“And so, you’ve kept coming back ever since,” I said with a smirk.

“Yep. I’ve pretty much tried every burger on the menu, but I always come back to the bacon cheeseburger.”

“It’s a classic. Even if the grease may kill us one day.”

“Sometimes you just have to take the risk.” I had a feeling he wasn’t just talking about hamburgers as he looked at me.

JOSIE

"I'm glad you showed up at the rink. I wanted to apologize," Wyatt said a few minutes after we sat down.

"Apologize for what?"

"For leaving you that morning at the elevator. I should have helped you answer the questions I'm sure the manager had." I could see the guilt in his expression before he ducked his head. Before I knew what I was doing, I reached across the table and touched the back of his hand.

"Wyatt it's fine, really."

He eyed my hand on his before looking back up at me and I felt my heart flutter.

"I knew the moment we stepped out they would recognize you and make things even more hectic. You didn't need that. So don't apologize."

"Still, I'm not the type to run from things. I've felt bad making you deal with it all."

"Well, I appreciate it." And I did. It's not every day a guy will apologize, so Wyatt doing so meant a lot. "Not to burst your bubble but they seemed a bit more concerned about me. You weren't even mentioned."

"Well, yeah, Batman doesn't like to get all the credit. Gotta let others have the spotlight sometimes."

I kept my face neutral as I nodded. "That's really nice of Batman. So selfless."

"He does what he can," Wyatt shrugged. We stared at one another for a second before we erupted in laughter.

At that moment Rick's voice boomed beside us. I pulled my hand back from Wyatt's and glanced up. The sight of the food in Rick's hands made my stomach growl.

"Here you two kids go." Rick placed the two burgers in front of us. "Enjoy."

I barely heard him as I gazed at the burger he placed before me. There was no hesitation as I grabbed it in both hands and took a huge bite. As Wyatt chuckled, I slowly glanced at him over my burger. His eyebrows were raised, and amusement danced in his eyes as he

grinned at me. I felt my cheeks turn pink as I sat there with a mouthful of food. He just laughed again before following suit.

"Don't judge me," I mumbled as soon as I swallowed.

"I wasn't."

"Uh huh." I didn't know if I believed him, not with the way his eyes glinted at me.

We spent the next few minutes eating in silence. A few people came and went but none paid us any attention.

"Does this make up for the bad nutrition bar?" Wyatt asked a few minutes later.

"Oh definitely." The food tasted amazing, just like Wyatt said it would be. "Better make sure to restock the nutrition bars. Just in case Batman needs to be rescued again."

"Very true. Maybe I'll invest in some different kinds," Wyatt mused as he bit into a French fry.

"Oh, yes, get the fancy kind."

"Bryton actually makes his own granola bars."

"He does?" Now it was my turn to raise my eyebrows. It was hard to picture one of the league's best Left Wingers in his kitchen making granola bars—especially a muscular, 6'1 giant like Bryton.

"He's always been a bit of a health freak. He likes to bring healthy snacks for the team."

"So, he wouldn't approve of a big juicy hamburger," I asked.

"What he or my trainer doesn't know won't kill them."

"Your secret is safe with me." I pretended to zip my mouth shut. "Thank you for breaking your strict diet for me."

"I get to have the best burger in all of Toronto with a pretty girl, it's a win-win," he said smoothly. I felt my cheeks heat up at the compliment.

"Such a charmer." I popped a fry in my mouth as I playfully shook my head.

"Don't know what you're talking about," Wyatt grinned.

"Uh huh."

He knew exactly what he was doing. The way he looked at me made me feel stupid things. Things I had no business feeling. Glancing back down at my plate I grabbed a fry and quickly changed the subject.

"So, Trevor and Bryton seem nice." It was a stupid subject change but thankfully Wyatt didn't call me out on it.

"Those two are giant pains in my ass," he said, munching on a fry. I could hear the underlying love and respect he had for his friends in his voice.

"How did you guys meet?" I only knew a bit about the three friends from what I'd heard on TV over the years.

“Trevor and I go back to freshman year of Uni. We were both new to the team, actually two of the three new players, so we kind of gravitated towards each other. His skating style matched mine so well that we instantly became friends on and off the ice.”

As he spoke, I placed my chin in the palm of my hand, listening intently.

“I only played one season before being drafted, but Trevor stayed back one more year before he entered the league. It was just sheer good luck we both ended up on the Knights. He likes to joke that it was fate that made sure we were put on the same teams both in Uni and professionally.”

“Hey, you never know. There’s always a reason for things. At least that’s what my dad used to say.” I paused, picking up another chip. “And Bryton?”

“He was drafted to the Knights mid-season during my second year. I think he felt like he had something to prove when he first got there. We were doing a simple scrimmage when he slammed me hard against the glass.” Wyatt laughed at the memory, the sound making my own lips quirk.

“During scrimmages, no one really hits each other, but Bryton did. At first, I was pissed off but when I approached him, the guy had the nerve to just smile and skate away.” Wyatt shook his head as he continued the story. “After practice, he waited outside the locker room for me. Apologized for the hit but said he wanted to prove that he was good enough to be on the team. The way he said I just…I guess I gained a lot of respect for him. It’s not easy moving to a new team mid-season. There’s a lot of pressure to prove you are good enough to be there in the first place, let alone stay.”

I couldn’t begin to imagine what that would feel like. All that pressure to perform and if you didn’t do well enough you could easily be drafted to another team. Or worse.

“I remembered how bad I wanted to prove my own worth my first year, so I knew how he felt. Afterwards, the three of us started hanging out. Been friends ever since,” Wyatt shrugged.

My curiosity peaked at the mention of his first year being drafted, but I knew I shouldn’t pry. We were only little more than strangers, but I couldn’t help myself.

“Were the Knights your first choice when you got drafted?” I asked.

“Honestly, I just wanted one team to want me, regardless of who they were. It was a tough decision entering the draft at nineteen. My mom wasn’t thrilled of the idea.”

“I bet,” I laughed. I didn’t think any parent would be all that thrilled by their child leaving school to pursue a career that had no

guarantees.

"While she wasn't exactly happy about it, she was the first person to stand up and cheer when my name was called for the second pick. Pretty sure everyone around us had ear damage afterwards."

"Your mom sounds amazing."

"She really is." The look on his face at the mention of his mom made my heart stutter.

"The whole night was kind of like a fever dream." He shook his head as if thinking back on it. I said nothing as I ate my fries, giving him a moment to enjoy the memory.

"What about you?" he asked. "You told me you used to run track?"

I was surprised he remembered since I only mentioned it in passing. But I had a feeling Wyatt paid more attention than I realized.

"I did. I ran track all through high school and got a scholarship to Toronto for it." Wyatt gave a low whistle of appreciation, and I felt pleased that he seemed impressed. He was the famous sports star out of the two of us. It wasn't easy getting a sports scholarship, you needed to be extremely talented for one. I managed to scrape by with my running.

"Ran freshman year and won a few meets," I dropped my gaze to the last few fries on my plate, moving them around. "It was the start of my sophomore year during practice that I tore my ACL. I remember falling to the ground and just screaming."

To this day I could still feel the pain of that moment. It was the most excruciating thing I'd ever felt, like someone had taken a baseball bat wrapped in razor wire to my knee.

"Were you able to come back from it?" His question was loaded for many reasons.

"I had surgery to repair the damage, but it took months to heal. Mentally, it took longer to process the fact that my knee would heal. The season passed as I slowly got better. But by time I tried to get back on the team there were better runners. My coach didn't trust I could come back stronger than before and advised that I hung up my shoes, so I did. With running no longer my priority I threw myself into school and graduated with my degrees."

"Wow. First off, your old coach was a dick." I looked up and saw Wyatt staring intently at me. "You tore your ACL; you didn't lose your leg."

I found it cute that he was annoyed on my behalf on something that happened years ago.

"It definitely sucked. I still don't really run anymore. Not because of the pain. What I once loved just doesn't feel the same after all of that."

"I'm sorry. That's a shitty experience," he said, his voice full of

sincerity.

“Thanks. It worked out in the end though. I like where I’m at now.” I truly did. As Wyatt fell silent, I could tell by the look on his face he was thinking of his own injury.

He may be healed physically, but is he mentally?

“Hey,” I nudged him under the table with my foot, getting his attention. “Your knee is going to be fine. Stay up on physical therapy and I’ll make you a jar of my famous pepper paste.”

“You really think pepper paste helps?” Wyatt looked at me with a skeptical look.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make a believer out of you,” I smiled.

“We’ll see about that.” He nudged me back with his foot.

“Oh, we will. You’ll learn soon I’m always right.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep. It’s one of my many amazing traits,” I said with a chuckle.

“Well, it’s a good thing I like being proven wrong.”

JOSIE

"So, tell me, hockey boy," I said once our food was long gone, including the dessert Rick brought out to us. The sun had fully set as we remained there talking, losing track of time. People came and went from the food truck, but we didn't move.

"Hockey boy? Really?"

"What? I think it suits you," I said cheekily. "It's your new nickname."

"Out of all of the nicknames?" Wyatt raised an eyebrow. "Can't even add man instead of boy."

"Well, what should your nickname be then?"

"Wy. B. Or just Wyatt," he rattled off.

"Really? All of them are one letter."

"Technically Wy is with the W and the Y." This time it was his turn to be cheeky. "And B is for my last name. The guys on the team call me that one the most."

"Don't worry, we'll come up with a better one for you, hockey boy," I giggled as Wyatt sighed.

"You were saying?" He waved at me to continue. Suddenly, the confidence I felt a few moments ago slowly faded away. Now I wasn't sure if I should ask the question that was on the tip of my tongue. But I had to know, at least before things went further.

"Um…should I be expecting some sort of girlfriend or crazy ex to suddenly show up at my doorstep wondering why I'm spending time with you?" I forced myself to keep eye contact as I asked. The last thing I wanted was any drama.

"No, no crazy girlfriend or ex," Wyatt said as he shook his head. "I…" He struggled for a moment as though trying to decide if he should say more or not. "I'm not exactly proud of my past relationships. I slept around a lot my first year of Uni and continued when I got drafted." Again, he rubbed the side of his neck. "Any sort of relationships I did have didn't last long but I never cheated. I can promise you that," he said firmly as he gave me a pointed look.

"Relationships can be a bit hard with everything in my life. Sometimes you just don't know people's intentions. It makes dating more difficult. So, it's been about a year or so since I last 'dated'."

“Women will seriously use you for fame?” It sounded like something that would come out of a book or movie, not real life. Yet I wouldn’t put it past certain people to do that either and I thought about the women I saw—the so-called fans—that hunted the players down at clubs and the like.

“You’d be surprised at how many do,” Wyatt said, bitterness seeping into his voice. His jaw clenched at what I assumed was a bad recollection.

Something close to anger washed over me at the thought of some girl using Wyatt like that. Using his kindness and handwork to get further in life, only to what? Cheat on him? Dump him when they found something better? Wyatt didn’t deserve that. No one did.

“That’s beyond shitty. I’m so sorry.” I reached across the table and took his hand in mine, squeezing. “You shouldn’t have to question someone's intentions when you are dating them.”

“Comes with the territory.”

The way he said it was like he’s gotten used to it. “Doesn’t make it right. Just because you get used to something doesn’t mean it’s okay.”

I’m not like that. I’d never use him.

I wanted to reassure him; we’d just met—he didn’t know me. So, as much as I wanted to say something I kept my mouth shut.

I wasn’t even sure if I would see him again after today.

We may go back to being strangers for all I know.

“You ready to go?” Wyatt asked a moment later. My heart sank at the thought of tonight already being over, but it was getting late and I had work tomorrow. Agreeing I stood up and helped gather our empty plastic plates.

Wyatt kept his hand on my lower back as we both said goodnight to Rick, with a promise to be back soon, and headed for the car.

“I will admit that was probably the best burger I’ve had,” I said as he slid into the driver's seat beside me.

“Told ya. I’ll never steer you wrong.” The lights on the dashboard lit up his face as he looked over at me. There was something about his smile that sent a rush of excitement through me. Almost like it held a certain promise that I had yet to know about.

And I found myself itching to know just what that promise was.

“So, you never got to answer the question,” Wyatt spoke after we pulled out of the parking lot and headed back to the arena for my car.

“What question?” I played dumb. I was slightly hoping I’d get out of answering it even though I was the one who brought it up in the first place.

“Uh huh, you know what one.” His hand tapped my leg. “Do you have a boyfriend?” I sighed knowing it was only fair I talked about my past relationships when Wyatt opened up about his.

“Nope, no boyfriend,” I answered truthfully. “My last ‘boyfriend’ was about a year ago.” The face of my ex came to mind, making me grimace.

“He was honestly a dick. There’s no other way to describe him.”

“How did you guys meet?”

“It was at an event I had to go to for work. He was the guy I was set to interview and at first, we clicked. We ended up talking for a few hours afterwards which led to him asking me out. Which ended up being such a mistake. My first sign should have been at the restaurant when he ordered for me. He literally ordered me a glass of milk.”

“Milk?” The flabbergasted look on Wyatt’s face made me laugh.

“Yeah. He interrupted me mid-order and ordered me a salad with milk. It was weird but I brushed it off. We had a pretty good conversation, but he talked about himself a lot. Every conversation we had was about his work and how accomplished he was. Whenever I brought up my own work, he’d make some comment about how women are better suited at home.”

I put my hand up before Wyatt could say anything. “Don’t even get me started on that one. Anyways, we only went out for about four months before I ended things. Of course, he wasn’t thrilled about it and said some choice words that I won’t say, but he was horrible.”

“Sounds like a total prick. As if women are just meant to stay home all day and have children.”

“He made an off comment about me quitting my job once.” Even I rolled my eyes as I thought back to the comment. Like a man has any say in a woman's career or life for that matter. Some men love to think women are nothing more than just baby makers.

“But before him, there were only two other guys. One was my first ever boyfriend my freshman year of college.”

“Wait, you didn’t date until freshman year?” Wyatt asked, flicking a quick, wide-eyed glance at me before turning his attention back to the road.

“I was kinda the dorky, nerdy girl in high school that guys didn’t really like. So, when Teddy showed up in one of my classes and asked to hang out, I was smitten. We dated for 9 months until I hurt my leg. Then he left me because I was ‘too much work’.”

I fell silent for a moment, thinking about how crushed I was in my darkest time, how I was ‘too much to handle’. That my accident was all it took for him to tell me that it wasn’t working out anymore. “Anyways, a week later I saw him with someone else. Top notch guy.”

Wyatt muttered something under his breath that sounded like ‘tool’ before I continued.

“And finally, my other boyfriend my junior year.” My hands formed into fists in my lap. “He was your typical frat boy football

player. Thought he was so hot and cool and when he gave me attention one night at a party, I thought I was on cloud nine. But uh…" The memories that hit me had me taking a deep breath.

"He had a temper. Only showed it behind closed doors. When the hits first started, he'd apologize, and I would instantly forgive him. I wanted to believe he didn't mean it and it would never happen again. He was so loving in front of everyone else, showing me off as his girlfriend, but as soon as we were alone it was a different story." I paused, taking another deep breath, noticing Wyatt's white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel.

"It wasn't a good relationship. I knew that on some level, even though I denied it for a while. Wasn't until my friends saw the bruises and marks that I finally left." I fell quiet, my hands shaking in my lap, but I clamped them beneath my thighs to steady them. It happened years ago, but it was still hard to talk about. To remember. It was honestly the darkest part of my life.

"Josie I—"

"I don't really want to talk about it," I mumbled, unable to look at him. There were certain things about the relationship I never spoke of or told anyone. I kept the darkest parts to myself and shoved them so far into a box, never wanting to think about them again.

"Okay," Wyatt said, his voice soft. I felt the tips of his fingers brush against my leg. Just the feel of his touch calmed me, and my breathing evened out. I pulled my hands back onto my lap, and as he went to pull his hand away from my leg, I found myself grabbing it, lacing my fingers through his. It surprised me as much as him, and yet, just that simple touch silenced the bad memories struggling to come out.

It baffled me that I was so comfortable with Wyatt. After my abusive ex it took me a long time to want to be touched by another man. Even now I still unconsciously flinch if someone raises a hand in the air. A few years ago, you wouldn't have caught me in a car with a random guy, yet here I am.

I wanted to question it. A part of me wanted to find something that would prove that Wyatt was not the nice guy he's portraying. At the same time, but for once I *didn't* want to. Today has been a good day, and I told myself to enjoy the moment. If I start picking and prodding it would ruin the first good day I'd had in a very long time.

We were silent the rest of the drive to the arena. Music played softly through the speakers but the only thing I could focus on was my hand in Wyatt's. Not once did he make any attempt to let go as he drove one-handed.

When we pulled up next to my car I didn't want to get out. Didn't want to let go of his hand, to relinquish the touch that had shoved those dark memories back into their box.

Reluctantly, I let go of his hand and got out of the car, meeting him at the driver's side of my own. I stood there awkwardly shifting from one foot to the other, wanting to say something but any words stuck in my throat.

“Would it be okay if I gave you my number?” Wyatt suddenly asked. Butterflies erupted in my stomach. I tried my best to keep the surprise and excitement off my face as I nodded. I quickly reached into my bag and pulled out my phone, almost like he was going to rescind the offer.

“Here.” I handed my phone over, biting my lip as I watched his long fingers type his number in. As I realized he seemed to type more than just his number, I leaned forward to take a look as he closed the screen.

“Here you go.”

Fighting against the urge to check what he’d done; I tossed the phone back into my bag and slid into the front seat. Just as I was about to shut the door, his hand stopped it, pulling it back open. He bent down to look at me.

“I’ll follow you back to our apartment building.” He said it almost like a question. Like he wasn’t sure it would be okay with me. I couldn’t get my voice to work so I just nodded.

True to his word, Wyatt stayed behind me the whole drive home. He even parked his car beside mine and patiently waited for me to grab my things. I’d barely stepped to his side when he put his hand on my lower back and guided me towards the building. Through my clothes the skin his hand touched burned.

The silence between us was comfortable, albeit a little awkward, as we entered the building. The both of us looked at the elevator then at each other.

“Stairs?” He suggested, and I knew our last encounter with the elevator was on his mind.

“Stairs.” We shared a grin before heading for the stairwell.

No getting stuck for us tonight.

We made it up the first four flights before I started regretting the decision. The heeled boots I wore were not meant for stairs, and neither were my legs. While I was trying my hardest not to show that I was dying, Wyatt casually took the stairs one at a time like it was the easiest thing in the world.

Why the hell did our building have so many stairs?

“Stupid hockey player,” I mumbled.

“Did you just call me a stupid hockey player?” Wyatt gave me an amused look over his shoulder.

“Yes, I did. You’re not even winded. It’s not fair,” I huffed.

“Want a piggy-back ride?” He suddenly offered.

“What? No, I’m good,” I shook my head, my voice coming out a bit breathless.

“Or I can throw you over my shoulder?”

I started to laugh, thinking he was joking, but when Wyatt stopped and reached towards me, I darted up two steps before he could.

“I can still throw you over my shoulder, you know,” Wyatt smirked.

“Well, I am a strong, independent woman.” I raised my, and turning on my heel, started back up the stairs. Behind me Wyatt huffed out a laugh but continued after me.

By the time we made it to my floor I was out of breath and wishing I’d taken Wyatt up on his offer.

“That was fun.” I heard the laughter in his voice.

“So fun,” I muttered as we walked down the hall to my apartment, my mind going a million miles a minute.

Will he expect to come inside? Will he kiss me? Will I see him again? What if everything I told him was too much, and I’ve scared him off? That walking me to my apartment is just him being polite.

When we stopped at my door, we turned and faced each other, our eyes meeting. It was like we both wanted to say something but couldn’t get the words out.

“I had a good time tonight,” I finally said.

“I did too.” The hard lines of his face relaxed a little as he smiled softly down at me.

“Thanks for walking me to my door,” I said lamely, to which he just nodded. Unsure of what else to say or do, I grabbed my keys and unlocked my door. I hesitated for just a second, waiting to see if he’d say anything more, but when he didn’t, I stepped into my apartment.

“Goodnight Wyatt.”

“Josie.” His voice stopped me from going any further. Turning to the side I gazed at him, standing there awkwardly on the other side of the threshold, hands at his sides. “I don’t know if you have anything going on Friday, but I have a game and I was wondering if you would like to come?”

His offer took me completely by surprise. Here I was thinking he was going to something like ‘it was nice meeting you, see you around’. Instead, here he was asking me to come and watch him play.

“I, uh…” I stammered, unable to get my vocal cords to work.

“If you already have plans, that’s fine too,” he said in a rush, and I could hear an edge of nervousness in his voice.

Who would have thought? A bigshot like Wyatt Boone, nervous to ask a girl to come to one of his games.

“I would love to.”

Like hell I’d say no.

“Yeah?” His blue eyes lit up at my words. “Okay, great. I’ll text you the details.” He stared down at me for another second before he cleared his throat and took a step back. For a second, I imagined that he was about to kiss me.

“Goodnight,” he said instead, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Goodnight.” Before I could do anything stupid, like pull him into a kiss, I quickly closed the door. Leaning back against it, I placed my hands on my burning cheeks, and smiled wider than I had ever done before.

Wyatt asked me to come to his game Friday! He wants to see me again!

A squeal erupted from me as I sunk to the floor. I was still there, reliving the evening when I felt my phone buzz in my handbag a few minutes later. I quickly pulled it out and found a new text from

Wyatt, although the name was something different.

Hockey Boy: I had a good time today.

My smile widened further as I read the text and the one above it. It was a text sent by ‘me’ and it said;

I will always trust Wyatt Boone’s food recommendations.

I ended up sitting there on the floor of my apartment for a good ten minutes re-reading the texts, feeling like maybe today was the start of something new and exciting.

WYATT

"How's the knee feeling today?" My physical therapist, Asher, asked as he entered the room.

"Not bad," I shrugged, moving back on the padded bench as he approached.

"Is that the truth or are you sugar coating it?" The look he gave me said that he wanted a real answer. Asher had spent the past year helping me rehab my knee. The 6'2 former soccer player was said to be the best physical therapist in Toronto and came highly recommended after my surgery.

When I met him at our first appointment, I was a total dick to the guy. I didn't want to be there and made sure he knew it. Asher still showed up every day and once I finally got my head out of my ass, I learned he'd been in the same positio*n* I was in.

He wasn't lying when he said he knew how it felt.

In the height of his soccer career, he blew out his knee. Before then, they'd called him a soccer prodigy. Then, just like that, his career–and dreams–were over. At twenty-three, he decided to become a physical therapist. Said he wanted to give back, like the people who helped him when he needed it. He moved back home and now at thirty-one he was a great physical therapist.

Over the past year he's helped me to see that while my injury sucked, it wasn't life ending. Aside from helping my knee he's also helped me mentally. Showed me that worse things could have happened, and I should be happy that I still had a career waiting for me.

Knowing I couldn't bullshit him, I leaned back on my hands, right leg stretched out in front of me, and sighed. "It aches a little. I ran ten miles yesterday." Which probably wasn't the smartest idea especially after yet another hard practice.

"Have you been doing the stretches I showed you?" he asked, grabbing my calf.

I relaxed my leg as he started bending and moving my knee. "I have. I make sure I stretch after every practice, before bed and when I wake up."

"Good." Asher rotated my knee, the movement making my wince

slightly. “Have practices been intense?”

“You have no idea. Coach is riding our asses.” As a former athlete Asher knows exactly how intense practices can get. Plus, he knows, along with the rest of the world, how shitty we’ve been playing.

“How does this feel?” He bent my knee and turned it to the left, watching my face for the truth.

“That feels fine,” I answered. There was no pulling or pinching in my knee. The only thing I could feel was the stretch up my hamstrings which felt great.

“Good. This?” He did it again but turned it to the other side. When I said the same thing, he placed my leg back down on the bench. “You’ve done a good job letting the muscles around the tendon heal. Let’s get you on the bike.”

“I have a question for you.” I hopped on the exercise bike, slipping my feet into the foot straps. “Have you heard of pepper paste?” It’d been on my mind ever since Josie brought it up. I’d yet to try it and was still dubious.

“Pepper paste?” Asher raised an eyebrow as he set the bike timer to fifteen minutes.

“Yeah. Apparently, you use cayenne pepper and some sort of oil to make a paste,” I explained.

“Hm, sounds like a homeopathic thing. I do know cayenne pepper has anti-inflammatory properties. Why?”

“A neighbor of mine recommended it. She said it helped her with her ACL.”

“Your neighbor is a woman,” he said teasingly.

“That’s what you got from that?”

“Is she pretty?” Asher completely ignored me.

Josie’s face came to mind. I thought about her beautiful smile and the way her eyes twinkled when she teased me. Pretty was an understatement.

“Wow. She must be pretty, the way you just completely zoned out there,” Asher laughed, wrenching me out of my daydreaming. “Yes, she is,” I grumbled, annoyed that I could feel my cheeks warm.

“And?” he prodded.

“And what?”

“There’s more to the story, I can tell.”

“And they say women gossip,” I groaned as I peddled.

Asher didn’t say anything, crossing his arms and leaning back on another exercise bike waiting for me to talk. I knew the guy would just stand there silently and wait indefinitely until I said something. The man had an uncanny ability to remain silent and make people spill their guts. He honestly should have been a psychologist.

“Fine,” I finally caved. “Last Friday I got stuck in my apartment's

elevator with a girl named Josie. We bonded over us both tearing our ACL's."

"You were stuck in an elevator all night?"

"Pretty much. Wasn't that bad actually." And it wasn't. Not with Josie there with me.

"Have you seen her since?"

"I took her to Rick's food truck a couple of days ago." I could feel his gaze boring into the side of my face. "And she's coming to the game tomorrow." I said it casually like I still wasn't fixated on the fact she said yes.

"A game." The way he said it made me glance over at him.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You don't get to pry and then not answer. What?"

Asher sighed and leveled me with a look. "We both know how women are when it comes to athletes. Just be careful is all."

I wanted to argue with him that Josie wasn't like that, but he was right in some ways. We were still strangers. I didn't know Josie well enough to know she wasn't secretly a puck bunny. But there was just something about her that made me believe she was nothing like those other women.

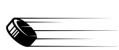
I'd been burned enough times in the past from women using me only for my status and money. When I was younger, I wanted to believe the best of any woman that showed interest in me, but I was often proven wrong, and over the years I'd become a bit jaded. Hard not to when you've been used so many times.

So, while I knew I needed to be careful, I didn't want to stop whatever was happening between me and Josie.

Thankfully, the bike took that moment to beep, signaling my time was up–as was the conversation.

"Onto some floor stretches," Asher instructed. I was grateful that he didn't push the topic further as he helped me run through floor stretches. Within minutes we were back to giving each other shit.

While I laid there doing my stretches, my thoughts drifted to tomorrow night's game, and seeing Josie in the stands. I couldn't stop thinking about Josie and her coming to the game tomorrow.



A FEW HOURS LATER, I pulled up out the front of my mom's house for our family's weekly dinner. It'd been our weekly ritual for years. Even when my schedule gets crazy, I make sure to take a day in the week to

come home.

"Ma, I'm here," I called out as I stepped through the front door.

"In here!" she yelled back, her voice coming from the kitchen. I could already smell the delicious dinner she had cooking. Walking into the kitchen my mom looked over her shoulder and smiled from where she stood at the sink.

"You're early." Her short brown hair fell to her chin and the corners of her eyes crinkled into delicate laugh-lines; the only sign that she was getting older. If you saw my mom, you would think she was 33 instead of 50.

"Just excited to see you." I went over and kissed her on the cheek before grabbing a hand towel and started drying the dishes as she washed.

"I think you're just excited for my cooking."

"I always crave your home cooking."

"Don't worry I made enough for you to take home for later." My mom patted my hand as I grinned, like she knew what I was going to ask without me needing to say a word.

"I always knew I was your favorite."

"Get in line, hotshot." I turned at the familiar sound of my older brother's voice as he walked into the kitchen. "We all know I'm mom's favorite on account of being the first born and all."

I rolled my eyes as Landon came up to my mom's other side and kissed her cheek. He shot me a smug look over her head.

"Like you could ever be her favorite," I scoffed. "I'm the golden child."

"Why do you two bother arguing about it, when we all know it's me?" Walking through the kitchen came my little brother, Mateo. "As the only person still living here it's safe to assume it's no contest."

As per usual the three of us started bickering back and forth good-naturedly, each stating a reason as to why we would be my mom's favorite.

"Do we seriously have to have this conversation every week?" My mom finally interrupted us, hands on her hips as she stared us down in mock seriousness.

"Pretty much," I shrugged, sharing the same smirk with my brothers. If you couldn't tell from looking at us that we were related, all we had to do was smirk and you'd see the resemblance. The Boone family smirk, my mom liked to call it.

"You three boys will be the death of me. Now, Mateo, go clean up," she gestured to his sweaty, dirt-laden football uniform. "And you two," pointing at Landon and me. "Go set the table while I finish up."

We all knew better than to argue, so as one we all said, 'yes ma'am' and went to do as we were told. My mom rolled her eyes, but I

caught the smile on her face. We may drive her nuts sometimes, but she loves us.

"How have things been?" Landon asked as we got started on setting the table. It felt like ages since I last talked to my brother, when it's really only been about a week. Despite the age gap between us we were close. Landon basically helped raise me when my mom had to work. As my older brother, he was the one I always looked up to and who I came to when I had problems.

When I was ten and came home crying because some kid pushed me, Landon patched me up and told me that Boone's don't sit back and let others bully us. The next day at school he went right up to the kid who pushed me and punched him in the nose. He was only thirteen at the time.

Landon taught me to stand up for myself and not take shit from anyone. No matter what, he was there for me at every game, every loss, when the girl I had a crush on went to homecoming with someone else. He took over the role my father left vacant when he left us. The father figure Mateo and I needed.

"Fine," I finally answered, keeping my gaze on the cutlery and ignoring the look Landon shot me from the other side of the table. It was his *'don't lie to me'* look he's perfected since I was a kid. It was a look he used to give me when I was younger, and I'd lie about brushing my teeth or that I did my homework when I really was at the rink.

Guess the look still works when I'm 26.

"You've seen the last six games," I sighed when he didn't say anything.

"I saw. You guys got your asses beat."

And there's my no holds barred brother.

He always told you how it was, regardless of whether you wanted to hear it or not. "There's still plenty of games left in the season. You guys can bounce back."

"Hope so."

Teams go on losing streaks all the time, but after losing before the playoffs last year we needed to come back stronger. Show we were the team that could win another Cup Championship.

"It's only been 6 months. Most people don't come back this fast," Landon reminded me. He wasn't wrong. Some people never came back after an ACL injury, let alone play after 6 months.

"Are you guys ready for tomorrow's game?" Landon asked, moving around the table with napkins, with me following behind placing the silverware.

"I think so. Coach has been running us down at practice, but we are looking good." I wasn't about to tell him that the main reason I

was looking forward to the game was to see Josie.

“You better. If not, I'm going to have to replace you in my fantasy hockey league,” Mateo said as he walked in, this time dressed in a clean shirt and pants.

“I already did. I now have Mathews,” Landon added.

“Wow, thanks for the confidence,” I deadpanned. Even my own family was replacing me in fantasy league.

“Anything for you, bro,” Mateo said, slapping me on the back.

“But seriously Wy, get your head out of your ass. You’re costing me. I dropped from first to fourth,” Landon said.

“It should be considered cheating to have your own brother in your fantasy league.” I pointed out.

“Not like we’re winning,” Mateo remarked, and I glared in his direction.

“What? It’s true.”

“You’re a little shit you know that?”

“Yeah, and I’m still the best Boone. I mean look at him,” Mateo pointed to Landon. “He’s getting old. And you, you’re kinda losing it, so all the greatness is falling onto me now.” He gave Landon and I a cheeky grin.

“You going first or am I?” Landon asked, perfectly calm as the two of us slowly moved towards Mateo.

“You can do the honors.” The words barely left my mouth before Landon lunged towards Mateo. The little shit was fast, but I blocked his path just in time for Landon to wrap his arm around Mateo’s head and put him in a headlock.

“Ow!”

“I’m barely holding you,” Landon scoffed.

“I need my beautiful face. How else am I going to get the ladies!”

“What ladies,” I smirked.

“I’m telling mom!” Mateo said with his head locked under Landon’s arm.

Right on cue, mom stepped into the dining room. All three of us froze as she stared at us. Her eyes look at Mateo in a chokehold before moving up to Landon, who hadn't released him, remaining perfectly still. I raised my hands innocently as she looked at me.

“Where did I go wrong.” she muttered before turning on her heel and returning to her cooking.

Landon kept Mateo in a hold for another second before letting go. Mateo sent us a smug look before sauntering out of the room.

“Come on, old man. Let’s grab the food.” I clapped Landon’s back, grinning at the glare I received, and headed back into the kitchen.

WYATT

"You're coming to the game, right?" Mateo asked as we ate.

"Of course. I'm not missing you kick ass in the championship," I nodded.

Like I would miss my baby brother's big game.

I've made it a goal to try to never miss any of his games. There've been a few unavoidable misses thanks to my schedule, but I never want Mateo to know what it feels like not to have someone in the stands for you.

Because Mateo was only a month old when our father left, he has no recollection of him. So, Landon and I made it our mission to make sure that Mateo never lacked support. The championship was the biggest game of his high school career, so of course we would be front row.

"Wyatt language," mom scolded.

"It's not like he hasn't heard it before Ma."

"Yeah, but you and Landon need to lead by example for your younger brother."

"Yeah Wyatt," the smug bastard smirked over at me. We all knew the moment mom was out of ear range he swore like a sailor.

"How's the rink doing Lan?" I asked as I kicked Mateo under the table. Not wanting to be scolded he held back his yelp but glared at me.

"It's going well. We've gotten a lot of kids signing up for little league."

Landon played hockey in college like I did and was actually quite good but instead of going pro, he decided to do accounting for some firm here in Toronto. Wasn't until this past year he finally decided to quit the desk job. Then he made the best move of his life by purchasing an old rink, cleaning it up and running it.

Now he teaches skating lessons, has a couple of hockey little leagues for kids to join, and has started doing events there as well. Honestly Landon was a great coach too. He enjoyed hockey and for such a prickly guy, the kids sure loved him.

"Have you thought about hiring some more people to help out and coach? If you got enough kids, you could make another whole team," I

suggested.

"I've thought about it," he answered sincerely. "But we aren't really in a position where we can afford advertisements and stuff like that."

"You know I can—"

"Don't even finish that sentence," he snapped.

Here we go.

"I won't take any of your money."

I clenched my jaw. We'd had the same argument time and time again. And not just me and Landon. I'd had the same argument with mom. Playing professional hockey paid well, more than well, but neither of them would ever let me do anything to help them. It frustrated the hell out of me.

What's the use in having money if you can't use it to help the ones you love?

When Landon bought the rink, he wouldn't let me give him a single dime to go towards it. Instead insisting he could handle it on his own. We fought so bad about it; I didn't talk to him for a good month.

And my mom, I've tried so hard to give her money or to buy her a new house. A better house. But every single time she said no, that she had no intention in leaving our childhood home, where so many memories were made. It was only after months of nagging and pleading that she'd allowed me to pay for some minor upgrades to the house.

Mateo was the only person here who gladly let me pay for anything he wanted. Unfortunately for him, he was the only one *not* getting a handout from me. If he wanted something he had to work for it himself, just like how Landon and I did when we were his age.

Not wanting to get into it tonight I backed off. When Landon made his mind up about something there was no changing it. Yet another Boone trait we all seemed to have.

"The offer is out there if you need," I said, putting my hands up. Landon didn't say a word as he turned back to his food.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Mateo sit up and instantly knew what he was going to say.

"Can Wyatt buy me a—"

"No."

"HOW'S THE KNEE FEELING?" Mom asked out of the blue as the two of us stood at the sink once more. It sounds stupid, but I loved this little

ritual the two of us had. After dinner we stood there, side by side, washing and drying and talking. It's our thing.

"It's okay." I knew better than to lie to my mom. There's no hiding anything from a mother. "Been going to physical therapy every week."

"Everything still looking good?"

My mom was right by my side when I got hurt. Spent almost every day at the hospital with me, asking the doctors endless questions. She went full mother hen on me when I got discharged. Instead of letting me go back to my apartment she all but moved me into her bedroom here at the house.

Because my old room was on the second level and I couldn't get up the stairs that well, she graciously let me take her room, taking one for herself upstairs for the two months I stayed here.

It was like I was in high school all over again. She brought me food in bed and on the couch. Made sure I took my medicine. Even when she was at her non-profit job, she called me every hour to make sure I was okay.

My mom was a godsend. Even though I was an absolute dick those first few weeks she made sure I was taken care of and healing.

"Yeah, he says everything is perfectly fine."

"Well, that's good news." I felt her eyes on me as I dried a dish. I just nodded because it *was* good news. I was healed–and yet, I was playing like shit.

"Are you worried you're going to get hurt again?"

I knew the question was coming but it still made me freeze. It was always a question in the back of my mind. A question that I'd actively avoided asking myself over the past few months since the season started.

"What if I end up unable to play again?" The question left my mouth before I could stop it. I hated voicing my fears, but this was my mom. She knew me better than anyone, and she also knew how hard I'd worked to get to this point in my career.

"What if I get really hurt again and my entire career is over?"

My biggest fear of all.

While I liked Asher and I respected that he made a great career for himself after a horrible injury, if that was me in that situation…I don't know what I'd do. I don't want all my hard years of work taken away at a snap of a finger.

Because who am I without hockey?

Just those few months of healing from my ACL I felt completely lost, like my whole world was crumbling around me. When I finally got clearance to play, I told myself I wouldn't let an injury take me away from doing what I loved. Yet, at the same time, it's made me timid. There's a constant fear in the back of my mind that at any given

moment it could all be over.

For good this time.

"Honey." My mom shut the water off and turned to face me. "You know how brutal the sport can be. I knew it the first time you came home with a swollen eye from fighting on the ice." I smiled at the memory. I remember coming home so proud of myself for participating in my first fight.

"You don't play hockey scared. You never have and you're not about to start now. Wyatt Boone doesn't run." Mom gave me a firm look. "This is *your* sport. You were made for this, and you aren't about to let one little injury take that away from you."

"Wasn't really a 'little injury'," I muttered, but a sharp look from her made me shut my mouth.

"You have the power to decide what breaks you and what doesn't. Remember what you love about hockey and play with your heart."

She ended the conversation there as she turned back to the sink, finishing washing. I stood there soaking in her advice. Just like my older brother, my mom shoots right from the hip. She doesn't sugar coat anything for me.

Mom's right. I need to stop playing scared. It's only hurting me and my team. I need to come into tomorrow's game with a different mindset than I have the last six.

"Thanks Ma."

"Anytime. Now hurry up and finish so we can go listen to your brother drone on about his football game."

THE BUZZ of my phone took my attention away from the tv. Thinking it was Trevor or Bryton, I was surprised to open my phone and see a picture from Josie. It was a picture of her holding a familiar looking hamburger with the caption *'even better a second time'*.

I chuckled under my breath, not at all surprised she went back tonight. She'd kept mentioning Rick's in our texts during last week.

Wyatt: Wow and you went without me.

She instantly replied back with a shrug emoji.

Josie: Sorry not sorry.

Wow, I've made her into a Rick's hamburger monster.

I looked at the picture, taking in the wide grin on her face and the way her nose scrunched up just a little as she smiled. I took a screenshot of the picture without a second thought.

"Why are you smiling at your phone like that? You look like a creep," Mateo said, and my head snapped up, as I dropped my phone in my lap.

"I wasn't smiling," I lied.

"Yes, you were," Landon confirmed, leaning forward, keeping his eyes on me. "Is someone talking to a girl?"

I scoffed and shook my head. I was not ready for my family to know about Josie. Hell, we only went to Rick's two days ago.

"No."

"He is! Look! His cheeks are red," Mateo said, pointing at my face. I knew my cheeks weren't red, but feeling three sets of eyes on made me shift in my spot.

"It is a girl." Landon smirked. "Who is she?"

"No one." I mumbled.

"What's her name?" This time it was mom, her blue eyes sparkling at the thought of a girl in my life.

"Not you too, Ma," I groaned.

"What? I want to know if there's a woman in your life." Seeing the hopeful look on her face, I knew I couldn't say no. Not when she looked so happy at the possibility. It'd been a long time since my family saw me show any real interest in a woman. Knowing I had no other choice, I sighed.

"Her name is Josie."

"How did you two meet?"

"She actually lives in my building. We, uh…we sorta got stuck in the elevator together." I proceeded to tell them how I met Josie, all the way to us having dinner together two nights ago. "I asked her to come to my game Friday."

"My baby bro is growing up," Landon wiped a fake tear off his face. I flipped him the bird which just made him grin.

"You sound like you like her," Mom said with a knowing smile, reading me like a book, and I found myself nodding in agreement.

"I do." I hadn't fully admitted it to myself until right now. Josie and I may have only met a few days ago but I liked her.

A lot.

I liked being around her. And it was crazy how fast I already felt that.

"Bring her to my game next Friday," Mateo said.

His words made me pause. "I'm not sure. We've only just met each other."

“Why not? We can meet her and see what she’s like. If she’s cool, then she can come to my party on Saturday too,” Mateo said with a nonchalant shrug.

Yeah, like Josie meeting my family after only knowing me a week wasn’t a big deal.

“I agree, why not?” Mom added.

“I can’t expect her to be okay meeting you guys so soon,” I replied with a shake of my head. “It would probably just freak her out. Make her think we are moving too fast. We haven’t even gone on a real date yet. She’ll more than likely run in the opposite direction.”

“Just ask her and see what she says. If Mateo wants her to come, what's the harm in asking?” Mom reasoned.

I figured I could bring it up and see what she said. I just knew my family and how full on they could be at times. Probably the last thing Josie wanted. But the idea of her coming to Matteo’s game and meeting my family made me oddly excited. I couldn’t remember the last time a girl met my family. Certainly not the last few I’d ‘dated’.

“I’ll see how Friday goes and then ask her,” I semi-agreed. If by some chance Friday things went down the shit hole, then I wouldn’t ask.

“Cool! Can’t wait to see how hot Wy’s girlfriend is,” Mateo commented before receiving a barrage of playful punches from the rest of us.

JOSIE

Waiting all week to see Wyatt again was like torture. I don't know how many times I almost said *just screw it* and went to his apartment. But I had to tell myself to slow down. I couldn't act like some clingy girlfriend after only knowing him a few days.

In past relationships I always fell too fast. I was always the one who developed feelings first. The one in the relationship that gave all of myself and let them in, only for them to leave. I'd learned not to let myself get attached too soon. To not hope for much until I was sure of the other person's feelings.

And that's how it needed to be between me and Wyatt–at least for now. I couldn't let myself hope that whatever passed between us in the elevator could be more. Even if I felt butterflies every time he smiled. I had to be strong and not allow myself to get too invested.

When my alarm went off, I was already awake, too excited about going to the game tonight and seeing Wyatt. I couldn't wait to see him in his element and not just on tv. It felt surreal that I was going to an actual game.

The buzzing of my phone drew my gaze away from the ceiling. Reaching over, I grabbed it only to grin at the name that popped up.

Wyatt: Good morning.

I felt like I was back in high school texting my crush. Just seeing his name made me feel giddy. Why did Wyatt have to be so damn charming?

Josie: Good morning. You're up early today.
Wyatt: Have a small workout before heading to the stadium.

A second passed before he sent another one.

Wyatt: I already have your tickets at roll call. Just have to give them your name.
Josie: Wait, tickets? As in more than one?

Wyatt: Yeah. I figured you'd maybe want to invite a friend to come with you.

My heart fluttered in my chest. I couldn't believe he'd gone to the effort of securing me two tickets just so I couldn't have to sit alone at the game. Who does that?

Josie: Wyatt that's too much.

I'm someone who always feels uncomfortable when people do nice things for me. Not that I'm ungrateful, I've always just felt like there was someone else more deserving than me.

Wyatt: It's nothing. Players get free tickets.
Josie: I have to pay you something for them though.

It didn't feel right not giving him something in return. I had a feeling the seats were front and center. The kind that typically costs an arm and a leg.

Wyatt: Not happening. I won't take your money, Josie.

I shook my head at the phone. One thing I've learned about Wyatt already is that he's stubborn. This wasn't the first conversation we've had about the tickets and every single time he refuses any sort of money in return.

Before I could reply, Wyatt called me. I hesitated for a split second before answering the call and putting him on speaker.

"Hey you," he greeted, sounding a little out of breath.

"Hey."

"Go check your door."

"Check my door?"

"Yeah." His lack of details had me sitting up in bed.

"You didn't put a snake outside my door, did you?" I swung my legs off the side of the bed and got up, smiling at the sound of Wyatt's chuckle in my ear as I padded towards the front door.

"Nah I wouldn't go with a snake. Maybe a spider."

"Wyatt," I warned, hand paused on the door handle.

"I'm kidding. Open the door."

"I swear if there is a spider or snake, I'm hanging up on you," I threatened. Wyatt just laughed.

Swinging open the door I glanced around before spotting a bag sitting on the floor. With a smile, I reached for the pretty blue gift bag.

“What is it?”

“Open it and find out.”

Curious as to what he left on my doorstep, I balanced my phone on my knee, before opening the bag. The first thing that caught my eye was the familiar white and blue fabric as I pulled it out.

I gazed at the number 8 jersey, feeling like I was dreaming. As though he could see me, Wyatt started talking.

“I thought maybe you’d want to fit in with the crowd.”

I clenched the jersey in my hand trying to will my heart to slow.

“Thank you. I love it,” I said softly.

“Plus, I can’t have you watch me play wearing someone else’s number.”

“Of course not,” I laughed.

“I know you need to get to work, so I’ll let you go. But I’ll see you tonight.” I was certain I could hear hopefulness in his voice, and I smiled and nodded even though he couldn’t see me.

“Good luck tonight.” Knowing he needed to get back to his workout and get ready for tonight, I forced myself to say goodbye.

As soon as the call ended, I stared at the jersey. The giddy feeling in my chest grew. I really was about to go to a hockey game wearing the team captain's jersey.

I feel like I’m in a hallmark movie right now.

“So, I have a big question to ask,” I said into my phone hours later. I juggled my phone, camera, notebook and purse as I walked down the street. I’d just finished photographing a local brew pub that was going to be featured in *Fusion Weekly*.

Today reminded me of how much I loved my job. I literally got to spend the better part of today inside the brewery tasting different kinds of beers, along with food. The up-and-coming venue was owned by a younger couple that combined their love for beer and food.

It may have been an assignment for the magazine but it sure didn’t feel like one. Not with how sweet the owners were. They answered all my questions and gladly let me take photo after photo of the place. I knew for a fact as soon as word got out about the place it would be overflowing with patrons.

“Are you asking for my hand in marriage? You know the answer is already yes, babe.”

I snorted at my best friend, Tasha’s response. “One day.”

The funny thing was, if the two of us did go off and get married, I

doubted anyone would be surprised. We'd been inseparable for years. Are you really best friends if there hasn't been rumors at some stage linking you together romantically? Despite the fact we weren't blood-related, Tasha was my sister in every sense of the word.

"I got tickets for tonight's hockey game. Do you want to come with me?"

"How did you get tickets for the game?" I could hear her tapping away on her computer.

"Um…" I wasn't entirely sure how to tell her about Wyatt. Till now, I'd kept our relationship close to the chest. Not because I'm ashamed or trying to hide him. I wanted to keep Wyatt to myself until I was sure he wasn't going to run off. He still could, which is the scary part.

Plus, every time you bring up a guy to your friends it jinxed it—at least in my experience. Within days you're ghosted. I didn't want to risk that happening by telling Tasha or Lydia. Although I couldn't see any way around that now that I'd invited Tasha to the game.

"Jo?" Tasha prompted. She knew me like the back of her hand, and I could never hide anything from her. Knowing I was about to endure a lot of questions I decided to rip it off like a Band-Aid.

"One of the players on the team gave me tickets," I said it so fast the words jumbled together.

"Wait, what?"

"I met a guy who plays for the team, and he gave me tickets," I said it slower this time. Forcing myself to take a deep breath, I pulled the phone away from my ear in preparation as I silently counted down. *3… 2… 1…*

"You met someone! A hockey player! Josie Scott!

Glancing around, I made sure no one had heard Tasha's screeching through the phone, but it was safer holding it at a distance—I was too young to have hearing loss. I could see my office building up ahead as I continued down the street.

"Done freaking out yet?" I asked after a moment.

"When did this happen?" she demanded.

"The two of us got stuck in the elevator together last week."

"Wait, what? How could you keep that from me? And he lives in your building! How did I not know this?"

"I didn't even know myself until the elevator," I confessed.

Admittedly, I wasn't the best at paying attention to my surroundings. There were probably countless times I'd seen Wyatt within the building and never even knew. But then again, Wyatt had the ability to capture everyone's attention as soon as he walked into a room, so it was hard to believe I hadn't noticed before.

"And he gave you tickets to make up for the elevator?" Tasha

asked, but I knew what she was doing. She never outright asked. As a professional counselor, she knew how to slowly ease the information out of you. Tasha's basically a conversational wizard.

"Not exactly…I returned the jersey he lent me, and we ended up going out to eat. We've been talking all week."

"We have so much to discuss when I see you tonight."

"So, you'll go with me?"

"Like I would miss the chance to see a game and meet this hockey player," Tasha scoffed through the phone. Not that I'd expected her to say no. She was the type of friend you could call at midnight and ask to go for a drive, and she'd immediately say yes—no questions asked.

"The game starts at six, so we'll want to be there around five-ish to get through security."

"Sounds good. Want me to come pick you up?"

"Might as well. Save money on parking."

"I'll swing by later," Tasha said. "Oh! One more question!"

"Yeah?"

"Is he super-hot?"

"I'm disappointed I can't tag along tonight. I want to see this man in the flesh," Lydia commented as she leaned back in her desk chair. I'd invited her to join us, but she apparently had an evening meeting for the magazine.

"No doubt Tasha will keep you updated."

The three of us had a group chat, and all day it consisted of nothing but Tasha and Lydia messaging back and forth about Wyatt and me.

I couldn't blame them, and it was sweet that they were excited for me. It's been a long time since I'd dated anyone. Even with my last relationship a year ago, I wasn't fully invested. I'd gone through the motions, thinking I *needed* to be in a relationship.

Having such a shitty dating past made me hesitant to date again. But I couldn't deny the attraction I felt towards Wyatt.

"Go and have fun though, okay."

Though she smiled, she had the inquisitive look in her eyes that made me feel like she could read my mind.

"You deserve to be happy, you know."

"I know," I said quietly.

"Josie, look at me," she said softly. "You've had a rough year. A rough few, if I'm being honest—and for some reason you believe you

can't be happy. But you deserve to be. You need to go out and have a little bit of fun. And who knows? Maybe this guy will be everything you didn't know you needed."

My chest ached at her words. It *had* been a rough year, but maybe she was right. I needed to let go a little tonight and enjoy it.

JOSIE

"Okay, I already love him," Tasha said as the two of us walked towards the entrance of the arena.

"You haven't even met him yet."

"So? The guy has us parking where the team parks instead of with the fans. He already has brownie points in my book."

Before Tasha picked me up, Wyatt sent me a text giving me directions on where to park for the game. Turns out we were parking somewhere entirely different than most people. Tasha and I were both surprised as we followed his directions that led us to the rear parking lot. The security guard already knew my name and waved us through with a smile.

"Aren't you supposed to go all hard ass on him as my best friend?"

"Oh, I plan on it. But if he wants to bribe his way into my good graces, I won't say no." The grin she gave me had me snorting.

My best friend, ladies and gentlemen.

As we got in line to enter the arena, I noticed how many people around us wore a jersey sporting Wyatt's name and number. I felt a little thrill knowing I was the only one wearing an actual player's jersey.

Since it was huge on me, Tasha helped me tuck it into my jeans, so I didn't look like a toddler wearing her dad's clothing. At least I didn't look out of place surrounded by fans. The only person looking out of place was Tasha, who'd come straight from work, so her jeans and pink blazer stood out among the sea of blue and white.

While I was excited to see Wyatt play, it was also my first ever live hockey game. I'd seen plenty of games on the television, but I'd never gone in person. My dad and I always dreamed of attending a game together one day—to be close enough to see the fights happen and feel the cold from the ice.

Ever since I was a little girl, dad promised he'd take me to a game one day, but we never could afford to go. Once, he tried to get tickets, but I knew money was tight and I didn't want him wasting the little money we had on tickets. We ended up getting into a fight about it.

I think dad was hurt by it, but I explained to him that we were just fine watching the game on our little television in the living room.

Together.

Now, almost eight years later, here I was, finally attending a game in person. I would have loved to bring dad, knowing he'd have loved every second of this.

The thought of him sent a pang through my chest, which I quickly cast aside.

Not now. Focus on the fact I'm here to see a game and with my best friend.

A good fifteen minutes later, the two of us finally made our way through security. The crowds were crazy as we headed for the ticket booth. Thankfully there was no line, so we were able to slide up to the window with no issues. Just like Wyatt said, I only had to give the person my name and she handed over two tickets. The whole thing was surprisingly smooth.

As we headed into the building Tasha held onto the back of my jersey, so we didn't lose each other as we waded through the crowds. We felt like sardines as we walked.

"This place is insane," Tasha commented as we finally entered the building, following the sea of people.

"It really is."

The arena felt huge. Everyone's voices echoed off the cement walls, and music played above us. I thought the practice arena was nice—it barely held a candle to the game arena. Made sense why the team had an offsite training building that was a tad bit smaller than this place.

"We're this way." Tasha held onto my arm as I followed the signs that directed us to our seats. The lower we descended, the more excited I got that our seats were right up next to the ice. Once again, it made me wonder what kind of strings Wyatt pulled to get them for us.

"Woah," I murmured, staring at the ice rink in front of us. I was so busy gawking that I hardly noticed as Tasha took my ticket and showed the lady standing there.

"You're gonna freak out when you see where we are sitting," Tasha nudged me forward. I had to look away from the sparkling white ice as I followed the steps further down, each step bringing us closer.

When we reached our seats, I had to stop myself from squealing. We were in the front *row*. Literally right in front of the glass. Every time I imagined coming to a game it was always up in the nosebleeds. Never did I dare dream of seats this close.

As we sat down, I noticed there were empty seats on either side of us.

"You're practically vibrating," Tasha said, amused. "Am I going to regret coming?" As my best friend, she knew how excited I got when it came to hockey.

Back when we lived together, I would sit in the living room and

yell at the screen, cheering the players on and complaining at a bad call. Blame my dad—he taught me everything I knew. It got bad enough that our neighbors complained, and Tasha banned watching games in the apartment.

"No, I'll be good," I replied, but the look she gave me told me she didn't believe a word of it. *I* didn't even believe it.

All around us, people filled the seats, the arena getting louder with each passing minute. I could feel the excitement in the air as the puck drop drew nearer. Turning in my seat, I looked around the arena, surprised at how many people were there.

Looks like a packed house tonight.

"Thanks for coming with me. I know hockey isn't really your thing," I said, turning back to Tasha with a thankful smile. I knew if I came alone, I'd be sitting here anxious and nervous.

"Of course. Plus, I get to spend the next hour looking at hot men in uniforms." She wiggled her eyebrows at me.

"Always a perk." I mirrored her grin. "Although it's hard to see much under the helmets."

"Your guy has all his teeth, right?"

Your guy.

I felt my cheeks flush at the words. Wyatt wasn't my anything. Yet the thought of him as mine caused butterflies to erupt in my stomach.

"Yes, he has all of his teeth," I said, rolling my eyes. Though to be fair, hockey players were notorious for missing teeth or needing fake teeth.

Wyatt's perfect smile came to mind. Even if he had fake teeth, he had one of the best smiles I'd ever seen.

I was busy looking around the arena, Tasha typing away at her phone, when I felt the presence of someone sliding into the seat next to me, an arm hitting mine. I turned to look at the person and was surprised to see a girl my age.

She had the most gorgeous dark brown, curly hair. When she turned to look at me her eyes were probably the prettiest brown I'd ever seen. They made my brown eyes look like dog poop. And don't get me started on how her dark brown skin glowed beneath the lights.

"I'm so sorry," She apologized, reaching out to touch the arm she knocked.

"No worries."

"I was afraid I wouldn't make it on time. Damn traffic," She huffed, tucking her hair over her shoulder. She wore the same kind of jersey as me, making me wonder who she was. She looked like she was here alone.

"It took me, like, fifteen minutes to get through security," I said with a slight smile.

“Don’t even get me started on the security here.” The girl waved her hand around. “Sorry I haven’t introduced myself, I’m Mila,” she said, flashing a bright white smile.

“Hi, I’m Josie. This is my friend Tasha.” I touched Tasha’s arm to get her attention.

“Sorry, work stuff.” Tasha sat her phone in her lap and turned to Mila with a smile. “Nice to meet you!”

“So glad there’s other girls here tonight. Usually, it's just me sitting here alone, or I’m stuck next to some weird guy that feels the need to flirt. Or try to.” Mila rolled her eyes. “Like I’m sitting here wanting to be flirted with. But anyways,” My lips twitched at the way she rambled and switched subjects so fast. “It’s nice to finally meet after hearing so much about you.”

I raised my eyebrows.

Has she heard about me? I’ve never met her before. I’d remember if I had.

“Wow, that came out really bad. I’m Bryton’s girlfriend, he’s friends with Wyatt,” Mila quickly explained. “Bryton came home the other day talking about a woman coming to the rink to see Wyatt. So when I saw Wyatt the other day at practice I may have cornered him to know more.” Mila sent me a sheepish look. “It’s not every day a new girl comes into the group.”

“You’re totally fine. I probably would have done the same thing,” I reassured her.

“She’s not lying,” Tasha added. “Josie would totally have stalked you on social media.” I nudged her with my elbow.

“I’m so happy you guys came tonight. Although I probably should give you a heads up that I’m an avid hockey fan.” The way she said it was like she was hesitant to bring it up.

“You’re gonna fit right in with Josie. This one,” Tasha pointed at me. “Likes to yell at the screen. It’s insane.”

“I knew I would like you.” I found myself mirroring the grin Mila gave me. “Bryton loves to tease me about how intense I get during games.”

“Wonder what Wyatt will think when he sees this side of you,” Tasha teased.

“Don’t worry. Bryton finds it hot, maybe Wyatt does too.”

“Have you and Bryton been together long?” Tasha asked.

“About six months.” A dreamy look appeared on Mila’s face at the mention of her boyfriend. “It’s still fairly new but he’s amazing.”

“What position does he play?”

“Left Winger.” Mila and I said at the same time.

“I’m going to pretend I know what that is,” Tasha laughed. “Honestly, I’m here to eat something greasy and drink beer while I

check out Josie's new man."

"He's not my new man. We're just talking."

"Uh huh." The look both Tasha and Mila gave me said they didn't believe it.

"It's not every day Wyatt gives a girl tickets to watch him play."

"So this isn't a regular thing?" Tasha took the words right out of my mouth.

"Not that I know of. Bryton was surprised when he found out." Mila shrugged.

At Mila's words Tasha elbowed me with a cheeky grin.

"See?"

While Tasha and Mila chatted around me, I tried not to think too much about what Mila said. I knew better than to hope that I was the only girl Wyatt had brought to a game to impress them, but that didn't stop the giddy feeling growing in my chest.

"When does the game start anyways?" Tasha asked a moment later. "Isn't it supposed to start at six?"

Just as the words left her mouth the lights in the arena dimmed and a loud voice came over the speaker.

Mila looked over at me with a wide grin.

The game's about to start.

JOSIE

"Ladies and Gentlemen! Welcome to the Fortress!"

The voice yelled through the speaker. All around us fans cheered. Someone two rows above us let out an ear-piercing whistle. The shift in the air had me sitting up in excitement.

Now this is what I was looking forward to.

"Let's hear it for the New York Huskies!" The announcer barely got the words out before everyone booed as the opposing team skated onto the ice. Players in red and white skated by the plexiglass in front of us. We were so close, that if I leaned just a tad closer, I'd hear their skates carving up the ice.

"Damn these seats are good," Tasha remarked. All I could do was nod, feeling speechless in the moment.

"Now, for your home team!"

If I thought the booing was loud, it was nothing compared to the sounds that erupted from the crowd now. The whole arena shook as players from the Knights came out onto the ice. There was this electric feeling that seemed to encase the place at the sight of them. For a brief moment, I understood Wyatt's love for playing hockey in front of hundreds of fans. The feeling was almost addictive.

Next to me, Mila stood up. Anyone who wasn't already standing, got to their feet as the final three players prepared to skate onto the ice. Both Tasha and I followed her lead. My eyes were glued to the entrance as I waited for a glimpse of Wyatt.

"Give it up for the man who leads the league in record assists… your left winger…*Bryton Young*!"

Beside me, Mila cupped her hands around her mouth and let out the loudest cheer I'd ever heard from someone. It sounded like a 6'3 bear of a man, not a 5'6 woman who looked like she radiated sunshine. I leaned into Tasha as Mila continued screaming bloody murder as number 25 skated onto the ice.

Bryton skated over to the plexiglass in front of us, slowing down just enough to blow a kiss at Mila through his helmet. He wasn't my boyfriend but even I wanted to swoon at the gesture.

"God he's the sweetest," Mila said as she stared after her boyfriend with the brightest smile.

“Now give it up for the beast on the ice…your right winger… *Trevor Hall!”*

The floor shook beneath my feet as number 18 came onto the ice. Hall was known for being an absolute beast on the ice. Most games saw him sent to the box for hitting another player. If there’s anyone you want defending you on the ice, it's Hall.

Despite his size, he glided gracefully across the ice. I smiled as he approached the plexiglass. He gave me a small nod, but his eyes quickly passed over me, landing squarely on my best friend.

I watched as Trevor eyed Tasha before winking at her. He may have been wearing a helmet, but I could see the glint clearly in his eyes before he skated off.

I glanced over at Tasha and found her staring after Trevor with a slight frown. It was a look she had when she was contemplating something. I wasn’t sure if it was a good thing or not. Before I could tease her about it, the announcer spoke again, drawing my attention back to the rink.

A wave of exhilaration washed over me, knowing there was one player left to come onto the ice. The air around us seemed to shift into something *more*. It was a feeling I’ve never experienced before—and it was something I would never forget.

“And finally, your star player…captain of the Knights…”

I held my breath.

“*Wyatt Boone!*”

I’m pretty sure I lost a good chunk of my hearing at that moment. It felt like an earthquake as every single fan in the arena lost it. It took me a second to get my bearings before I quickly followed suit. I screamed along with everyone else as number 8 came onto the ice.

My whole body trembled as Wyatt skated around the ice, my eyes glued to his athletic form as his teammates clapped him on his back as he passed. As Wyatt skated towards me, I think I forgot to breathe.

He slowed just enough for me to catch the wide smile and wink he gave me. All I could see was him—everything and everyone else faded away. All I could do was stand there and stare at him, mouth wide open, before he took off in the other direction. My legs felt like Jello as I stared after him. I was in a complete haze as I lowered myself into my seat, before my legs gave out.

My entire body felt like it was electrified.

“Did you see that wink!” I barely heard Mila squeal beside me, still reeling from said wink. Both her and Tasha grinned at me, nudging me with their elbows as I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t wipe the smile from my face.

I’d always thought the face-off looked intense. Two players fighting for the puck, trying to get it to their own teammates. Our seats were

off to the side a little so we weren't head on to the fray, but I could see Wyatt facing off against another player. Hockey stick out, legs bent slightly, waiting for the ref to drop the puck.

The second he released it; they were there fighting for it. It only took a few seconds for him to come away with the puck, sending it towards one of his teammates.

I sat there, wide-eyed, watching some of the best athletes in the world play. Wyatt's powerful legs propelled him across the ice at a speed that seemed even faster in person than on the television. Trevor and Bryton were close behind him as they moved the puck back and forth between them.

I was mesmerized watching the trio. The three of them skated as if they were one, each of them instinctively knowing where the other was at all times. Trevor sent the puck in Wyatt's direction with a simple flick of his wrist and Wyatt was there instantly to grab it. Behind them Bryton was fending off other players trying to steal the puck.

I was buzzing as they came barreling towards us. The fans behind us yelled as players weaved in and out of each other. One second there were two players scrambling for the puck, and the next bodies were slammed into the plexiglass directly in front of us.

Mila, Tasha and I all jumped as the plexiglass rattled and shook. The sound of the players hitting it was louder than I'd anticipated. Of course, neither player was fazed as they skated off.

"Holy shit," Tasha breathed. She turned to Mila and I with wide eyes.

"Isn't it great?" Mila beamed.

"It's even more intense in person," I grinned back.

"Oh god, there's two of you," Tasha said as she glanced at us like she couldn't believe we'd enjoy watching grown men slammed against boards.

Before I could say something in response, the sound of fans booing jerked my head up. Further down the ice, I caught sight of number 18, Trevor, butting helmets with someone from the Huskies. From here I could see how intimidating Trevor looked. He may be wearing skates and tons of pads but there was no mistaking his height or the width of his shoulders. I'd seen enough pictures of him off the ice to know the guy was built. There's a reason other players don't want to go against him on the ice.

"What happened?" Tasha peered around me to see.

"Looks like Trevor is getting into it with someone." I watched as the Knights captain suddenly came between Trevor and the other player. Wyatt pressed a gloved hand to Trevor's chest and shoved him back, clearly saying something as he did.

“Who’s Trevor?” Tasha asked.

“He’s one of Wyatt’s best friends. He may be a fuck-boy, but he’s probably one of the nicest guys on the team,” Mila answered.

“He’s the one who just winked at you.” I added.

“Fuck-boy, huh?” Tasha said, and I couldn’t decide if she was intrigued or turned off. Then again Tasha’s always done the exact opposite of what people expect her to. Part of it has to do with her parents wanting her to act one way, so instead she did the opposite just to piss them off. Like the time she dyed her hair bright pink right before the big gala her parents hosted every year.

“He’s great though,” Mila continued. “We’ll have to go and see the guys later and introduce you.”

“Hm.” Was all Tasha said, but I could tell she was curious about Trevor.

That’s going to be interesting when they meet.

The next part of the game passed by uneventfully. Neither team scored, the goalies doing a great job at stopping anyone from landing a puck in the net. When the first intermission came, the three of us worked our way back up the stairs to grab a drink.

It’s crazy how fast Mila became a friend. There’s something about her that radiated energy and just pure kindness. She fit right in with Tasha and me. It felt like she’d been friends with us for ages, not someone we’d just met.

I’d never been the best at making friends. I was either too shy to initiate conversation, or I’d make a new friend for just a short while before they found someone else they bonded with more.

When I met Tasha, I thought that would be the same scenario. We were complete opposites, so I didn’t think for one moment we’d end up best friends. But here we are, eight years later and we’re practically sisters.

Meeting Mila, I could see her easily fitting in with Tasha and Lydia.

“So, you’re a photographer, right?” Mila asked as we waited in line for a beer.

“I am. I work at *Fusion Weekly.”*

“Wait, I've seen that magazine. I bought a copy last week!”

“All the pictures in there are hers.” Tasha nudged me with a smile.

“That’s amazing. You covered an event I did a few weeks ago.”

At my curious look she expanded. “I’m an event coordinator. Well, I’m an event coordinator assistant, but my boss is letting me take over events lately which is very exciting.”

“That’s amazing. Event coordinators do so much work.” I’ve talked to my fair share of them when I photograph an event.

“It’s never ending. I have an event coming up that’s taking literally

all my time and attention. Poor Bryton has had to deal with me canceling dates to get everything done."

"How did you and Bryton meet?" I asked as the three of us shuffled down the line.

"At an event. I was working and suddenly Bryton was there asking what he could help with. It was some charity work that his manager had him do. We ended up spending the entire day together and he asked me out later that night."

"That's really cute."

"You should have seen how nervous he was asking me out. It was adorable."

I grinned, picturing a hockey player like Bryton Young nervous in front of a girl.

"What about you Tasha? What do you do?"

"I'm a counselor. Think of a psychiatrist but without prescribing medicine."

"Wow."

"And she's really good." I reached over and squeezed Tasha's arm. I know how hard she'd worked for her job. One her parents hate, but what they can't comprehend is how amazing Tasha is at what she does. She loves it and she helps people. Not everyone can say they do that.

"Where did you two meet?" Mila asked. "Sorry for the twenty questions, I'm just a super curious person."

I laughed. "It's fine! We met at uni, and we've been friends ever since."

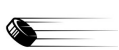
"Nice! What uni?"

"Toronto," Tasha and I said in unison.

"No way." Mila said, her eyes wide. "That's where I went!"

"Wow, what a small world," Tasha said. "How have we never crossed paths before?"

Before we could ponder on it further, the warning bell sounded, telling us the game would soon start again. Finally, we got our drinks and headed back to our seats. The whole time the three of us chatted. As I watched my best friend and my new friend talk, I found another reason to feel grateful that Wyatt gave me the tickets.



"GET THE DAMN PUCK!"

There were three minutes left of the game and the Knights and Huskies were currently tied 2-2. As the clock ticked down, the tension

in the arena was palpable. The fans grew antsy the longer we went without scoring. The player's hits became increasingly violent and aggressive.

There was a sense of desperation from the Knights fans and players alike. The need to break their losing streak. From what Wyatt had said, the team needed a win to regain their confidence.

Trevor had the puck and was scrambling to take a shot, but he was tripled-teamed, the other team crowding him, leaving him nowhere to go. When an opponent snagged the puck, all the fans around us booed.

My knee bounced as I shifted in my seat, the anxiety growing. I wanted the team to win just as much as everyone else, but mostly, I wanted that for Wyatt. Wanted him to see that he could come back from an injury better than ever. Just because they'd lost a few games didn't mean their season was over. They had plenty of time to rally back.

With sixty seconds left on the clock, everyone around us jumped to their feet. I didn't hesitate to do the same, my eyes glued to number 8.

When Trevor approached and slammed a player against the glass right in front of us, I didn't even flinch. I was too focused on the fact that the puck hurtling towards Wyatt.

Chewing on my bottom lip, I dared a glance at the clock.

Thirty seconds.

I watched with bated breath as Trevor, Bryton and Wyatt came together. They formed a triangle with Wyatt pulling up the rear. A tense silence fell over the arena, everyone's eyes fixed on the trio as they barreled down the ice towards the other end of the rink.

Trevor or Bryton shoved any opposition out of the way, clearing the space for Wyatt. I'd seen the three of them play on the television, but that was nothing compared to witnessing their skill in person. Now, they were only a few feet away from us.

"Shoot!" Mila screamed next to me.

As though hearing her, Wyatt brought his hockey stick back seconds before launching the puck towards the net. I swore it happened in slow motion as the puck soared across the ice. The goalie lunged to the side but was a split-second too late.

The puck slid right past into the net.

There was a moment's pause. Then the crowd erupted in a deafening cheer. On the ice, the Knights jumped the boards and headed straight for Wyatt, who had already disappeared behind his teammates.

With wide eyes and a giant grin, I turned to Tasha, thrilled to see she looked just as excited. I turned to Mila who jumped up and down, cheering.

“They won!” Unable to control myself any longer I started cheering alongside her, my yells getting lost in everyone else’s.

They finally won!

When the team broke apart, I managed to catch sight of a grinning Wyatt, his helmet now off. I knew this game meant a lot to him. After losing the last six games they needed this. *He* needed this.

As I stood there smiling like a complete idiot, Wyatt turned, and our eyes met. The smile on his face seemed to grow even wider. The sight of it making my heart patter in my chest. I gave him a dorky thumbs up. He threw his head back as he laughed, making me wish I could hear it. With one last smile, he skated after his team.

“That was amazing,” I breathed, feeling electric. I couldn’t imagine how Wyatt felt right now.

“They played great tonight,” Mila said.

They truly had. For the first time since the season started, the team looked like their old selves.

“They’ll have to do some post-game interviews and change, but we can slowly head down to the locker room if you guys want,” Mila suggested.

All around us fans were already making their way up the stairs which meant the parking lot would be a zoo for the next hour.

The three of us stood around talking as the arena slowly cleared out. There was no point in heading down to the locker rooms quite yet while the guys were busy, and I was glad to not have to weave through the crowd.

“This may be a bit forward,” Mila said, and for the first time she seemed nervous as she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. “Would you guys want to hang out sometime? I don’t really have many girlfriends and tonight was a blast.”

“I’d love to.” I didn’t even hesitate and neither did Tasha.

“Here, give me your number.” Tasha extended her phone. “We can plan a girl’s day and invite Lydia.” We passed our phones around, exchanging numbers with a promise to have a girl’s day soon.

With the place now clearing out, we made our way up the stairs. When we reached the top Mila turned in the opposite direction of the flow of fans.

As we followed her, I couldn’t help but feel like we were doing something wrong. A few workers watched us walk by, but no one stopped us. As we approached a set of double doors, I saw a security guard and was certain he’d stop us. Instead, all he did was smile at Mila and open the doors for us.

“After coming to enough games, the security guards start to recognize you.” Mila explained after the doors shut behind us. “They only let the wives or girlfriends through though. Can’t tell you how

many puck bunnies I've seen throwing fits, thinking they can come down here."

Puck bunnies.

Mila's words reminded me there'd be plenty of competition for Wyatt's attention—especially after making the winning shot. I bet the puck bunnies were already gathered outside the doors, waiting to snag a hockey player eager to celebrate. I felt a little sick at the thought.

I'm being silly. Wyatt wouldn't invite me here just to leave with a bunny.

"I haven't seen Wyatt play that well in such a long time," Mila said as we walked down a long empty hall, the sound of our shoes echoing around us.

"Wonder who he was trying to impress," Tasha smirked.

"He looked really good out there," I replied, ignoring her jab. A small part of me wanted to believe it was because I was there that Wyatt played so brilliantly, but I knew that wasn't the reason.

This was all Wyatt.

As we kept walking, I looked around, wondering if we were lost. There was nothing but cement walls on both sides of us.

"Uh, do you know where we are going?" I asked after a moment.

"The locker room is just straight ahead. Not sure why they made it feel like some sort of dungeon down here. Clearly a man designed it," Mila said as her heels clicked along the concrete. I snorted at her words.

She's probably right about that one.

Finally, we came to a fork at the end of the hallway. To our right, the hallway led to another set of double doors. An exit sign glowed above it, so I assumed it led to the parking lot. To the left, the hallway snaked further along.

Mila led us to the left, and fortunately we didn't have far to go before we came to another set of doors, the words *Locker Room* above it. A second later the sound of booming voices echoed through the door. We were definitely in the right place.

"I would say we go inside but I've made that mistake before. You'd think seeing a bunch of half-naked men would be a dream come true but let me tell you…it's not." Mila wrinkled her nose.

"Trust me, I learned that the hard way myself." I replied, shaking my head at the memory. Once, while dating who-shall-not-be-named at Uni, I'd unwittingly walked into the men's locker room. Talk about ruining the image of hot, half-naked men standing around, that's for sure.

"They just stand around completely naked, don't they?" Tasha asked.

"More like with their cups on their dicks, whipping their towels at

each other's asses when they win." Mila made a disgusted face. I laughed at her expression.

Sounds about right.

"So, there was this one time that I walked into the locker room…" Mila started, when suddenly the doors flew open. All of our heads snapped up to see Wyatt, Trevor and Bryton striding towards us.

I thought I'd see them in their suits, like most athletes have to wear before and after a game, but they were all dressed casually.

At the sight of her boyfriend, Mila forgot all about her story and flung herself at Bryton.

"You did amazing, sweetie!" She beamed at him, wrapping her legs around his waist before kissing him hard on the lips. Feeling a little awkward, I looked away from the happy couple and met the gaze of the one person I truly wanted to see.

Wyatt stared at me for a moment, looking me up and down, no doubt taking in his jersey I wore.

"Hi," I said.

My voice seemed to snap Wyatt out of his reserve, and with two strides, he stood in front of me. Leaning down, he wrapped his arms around my waist, and lifted me up so my toes barely touched the ground. My arms wrapped around his neck, the action taking me by surprise.

Wyatt nuzzled his head in the crook of my neck, his wet hair tickling my skin. His strong arms held me tight, pressing me against his muscular chest.

"You did amazing," I said against his neck. He held for another minute before gently lowering me. Despite having my feet firmly on the floor, I felt like I was floating. His hands remained on my waist as we stood there grinning at each other, not saying a word.

At the sound of someone clearing their throat, the two of us looked away a little awkwardly. Wyatt stepped back, his hands falling from my waist as I dropped my hands from around his neck. Instantly, my body missed the feeling of his against mine. If it wasn't for the fact we had an audience, I would have reached out and pulled him back to me.

Both Tasha and Mila smirked at me, and I felt my face flushing. Admittedly, I was so caught up in the moment with Wyatt, I'd forgotten we weren't alone.

"That was a great game, boys," Mila said, breaking the semi-awkward silence.

"Yeah, you guys looked amazing out there!" I gave all three of them a smile, but my eyes lingered on Wyatt a second longer than the other two.

"I was pretty great," Trevor bragged as he stepped forward,

throwing an arm around my shoulder. “I knew you couldn’t take your eyes off of me.” The wink he gave me would have made any other girl swoon, but I only had eyes for Wyatt.

Looking up at Wyatt, I caught him shooting daggers at Trevor and the arm he had around my shoulders. Trevor squeezed my shoulder, and I knew he was doing it on purpose.

“Oh yeah, you were the star of the show,” I said, tilting my head up to look at him as I played along. “By the way, this is my best friend, Tasha.” I ducked out from under Trevor’s arm and stood on the other side of my friend.

Bryton greeted Tasha with a nod and Wyatt said hello, but it was Trevor’s reaction I focused on. He looked Tasha up and down with a twinkle in his eye, absently licking his lips. I may not know Trevor all that well, but I knew that look in his eye—it was the same way every man looked when they met my best friend.

“Nice to meet you, Tash-ah.” Trevor dragged out her name as he extended his hand. As she accepted it, he brought it to his lips and kissed the back of her hand before winking.

“So, you’re the fuckboy,” Tasha grinned up at him. I almost choked on the laugh that tried to break free at her bluntness. Yet, Trevor’s smile didn’t waver—if anything, it only grew wider.

“I can assure you, nothing about me is a boy.”

“Hmm,” Tasha replied, freeing her hand.

Oh boy. They're going to chew each other up and spit each other out.

Thankfully, Tasha’s phone rang, cutting the tension between her and Trevor. With a quick ‘excuse me’, she walked away to answer the call.

“Want to grab a drink with the star of the show?” Trevor asked, turning to face the rest of us, though I could tell his attention was still on Tasha.

I glanced at Wyatt, not sure what to say.

Does he want to hang out? Does he just want to go home alone? Does he even want me to tag along with him and his friends?

As though he could see the questions in my expression, Wyatt stepped forward, elbowing Trevor out of the way. I peered up at him unsure what his answer would be.

“Want to go out and celebrate with this dumb ass? If you don't, we can go somewhere else.” The idea of going somewhere where I could be alone with Wyatt was appealing, but I also knew how important it was for him to go and celebrate with his friends. Especially after breaking their losing streak. I was touched he’d even think about ditching his friends for me.

“We can celebrate. Why not?” I shrugged, a smile playing on my

lips.

"Why not." he echoed, smiling down at me as he draped his arm over my shoulders.

JOSIE

We all made our way out of the arena to the parking lot, other players from the team shouting at each other. Promises to meet up to celebrate the team's win. The few that passed us slapped Wyatt on the back with wide excited grins. Thankfully no puck bunnies in sight.

Coming up to Wyatt's car, a hand on my elbow drew my attention to Tasha.

"Sorry," Tasha said, shooting me a sad smile. "Just a little *work* emergency." Tasha didn't even have to elaborate on who she was talking about.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's all good. Will you be okay by yourself?" Her eyes silently communicating with me. Even though I wanted my best friend to come out with us I knew she had something to take care of. Plus, I'd have Mila there and I trust Wyatt despite barely knowing each other.

"I'll be fine." I gave her a reassuring smile.

"Wyatt," She turned to the man by my side. "I'm leaving my best friend in your capable hands, so you'd better make sure she gets home safe."

"You can count on it," Wyatt said without hesitation.

"And you," Tasha turned to me again. "Text me as soon as you get home."

"Will do. Same for you."

After she gave me and Mila a hug, Trevor stepped forward, arms open for one of his own.

"In your dreams." Tasha shook her head at him before heading for her car just a few down.

"You'll definitely be in my dreams tonight!" Trevor called out after her.

"We'll meet you two there." Bryton cut in a moment later. Wyatt gave a nod before putting a hand on my lower back, leading me to the passenger door of his car.

"So where are we going?" I asked as Wyatt drove out of the arena parking lot. "Going to meet up with the rest of the team?"

"Not exactly," Wyatt shot a quick glance at me. "We're just going

to a local place we like to go to. It's smaller, quieter. Less…ah…"

"Fans?" I supplied knowing he was talking about the puck bunnies.

"Yeah," he smiled back. "This place we can hear each other speak."

Admittedly, I loved the sound of that, until Wyatt pulled into the parking lot of what looked like a seedy dive bar. I got out of the car, as I looked at the place, suddenly thinking a loud overcrowded sports bar was appealing after all.

"Come on," Wyatt said, taking my hand in his and giving it a reassuring squeeze. "I promise it looks much better on the inside. We come here to get away from fans."

"Never judge a book by its cover, right?" I joked.

"That's the spirit!"

As he held the door open for me, I was pleasantly surprised that he was right.

While it *was* a little smaller than some bars I'd been to, I liked the look of it. A long bar took up half the space, lined with barstools. Behind the counter, a man and woman worked, mixing drinks and popping beer bottles for customers. Scattered around the room was a mix of high and regular tables, many of them already crowded with patrons.

Near the back of the room, boisterous laughs and taunts came from around three, huge, pool tables as people played. On the other side, there was a well-worn dance where a few clearly intoxicated people swayed to the music.

The place was busy, but not overly so, as we grabbed ourselves a table.

I wonder if they purposely make the outside look like shit, so it's not slammed with hockey fans since it was just around the corner from the arena.

"Gentlemen!" I looked up as the bartenders waved at us with welcoming smiles.

I guess they come here often.

A few patrons joined in the greeting, but for the most part it seemed like most of the people couldn't give two shits that star hockey players had just walked in the door.

Okay. Now I see the appeal of this place.

"Are you sure you want to stay?" Bryton looked over at Trevor, eyebrows raised. "There's no puck bunnies in sight."

"First off, fuck off. Second, I don't need to go out partying after every single win. The guys will survive without me tonight." Trevor shook his head at his friend. I was surprised the guys would choose this place over a club or somewhere else to celebrate their first win in six games. Trevor was the life of the party and was constantly seen leaving clubs and bars with different women after games.

“Thanks for gracing us with your presence tonight then.” Wyatt joked. In return Trevor flipped him the middle finger.

As the three of them joked, Mila butting in a few times, I looked around the bar. I liked the old-school vibe the place had. It’s somewhere Dad would have gone for a few beers after work, to talk shit with his friends and play a little pool.

A moment later one of the bartenders appeared at our table. All three guys greeting the guy like old friends.

“What can I get you guys?”

I looked at Wyatt, unsure what to order. “Do you like beer?” he asked.

“Of course,” I smiled.

“Are you hungry?”

I nodded, realizing I was ravenous. “I could definitely eat. Whatever you order will be fine.” I let Wyatt order for me before the others chimed in with their own order.

As soon as the bartender left to put in our drinks and food Trevor launched into a story about him and Wyatt in Uni.

“So, it’s freshman year, and we’re literally days away from the draft. This one,” Trevor jerks his thumb towards Wyatt. “Decided to get drunk; I’m talking piss drunk. Having practice the next day seemed to have escaped his mind. Of course, Coach went full out during practice, and when I looked across the ice I saw Wy was looking green,” Trevor laughed loudly. “Minutes later, as we’re in the middle of suicides, he throws up everywhere.”

I laugh along with the others, imaging poor Wyatt sick as a dog at hockey practice. Wyatt winced at the memory.

“Bet you didn’t drink for a while after that,” I teased.

“Was a good month if not more.” The look on his face made me giggle.

The bartender showed back up a moment later, filling our table with pints of ice-cold beer and platters of fries, onion rings and sliders. I eagerly grabbed one and bit into it, the beef patty tender and flavorful.

Not bad for a dive bar. No wonder the guys come here.

For the next hour, the five of us sat around drinking, eating and laughing. Trevor telling stories about the three of them and the stupid things they got up to their first few seasons in the league. It was fun learning about Wyatt through the perspective of his best friends. I also learned more about Bryton and Mila.

“Our first date was to a Marvel Convention. Bryton showed up to my place in a Spiderman costume.”

“Hey! Come on,” Bryton protested, “You’re ruining my street cred in front of the newbie!”

“What street cred?” Trevor scoffed. “You’ve always been the nerd of the group, through and through.” We all laughed, though I noticed the way Mila and Bryton gazed lovingly at each other. They were the cutest couple, and more than once, I’d had to look away as they kissed or stared at each other with lovesick eyes, feeling like I was intruding.

“Everyone knows stuff about marvel. Like the game Thor gets addicted to in *Avengers: Endgame* is Fortnite.” Bryton said it so casually like we’d all know that.

“Dude, no one else knows that.” Trevor shook his head.

While the two started bickering I turned to Wyatt.

“So, Wyatt Boone was quite the partier in Uni huh.” I said with a raised eyebrow, sipping my beer.

“What can I say I knew how to party,” he winked.

“Knew? Not so much now?” I teased.

“This is the extent of my partying.” He lifted his beer, a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

“Wow.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” I shrugged. “Throwing up after being really hungover is kinda boring.” His eyes widened at my mocking, and I stifled my words with a mouthful of beer.

“Excuse me? What about you Ms. Partier,” Wyatt probed as he raised his eyebrows at me. “Anything *you* want to share?”

“Nope,” I said with a grin, grateful that Tasha wasn’t there to throw me under the bus.

The stories she could tell about me.

“Nuh uh, you don’t get to sit there and judge and not spill a secret.” Wyatt shook his head.

“I don’t have any party stories,” I protested.

“I call bullshit,” Wyatt leaned towards across the table. I found myself mirroring the move, ignoring the watchful stares of the others.

“What do I get if I tell you one?” I countered.

God, his eyes are beautiful.

Wyatt was quiet for a moment, and I felt the tension rise between us. In the dim bar lighting it made the contours of his cheeks and jaw even more striking.

He looks good enough to eat.

“I promise I won’t laugh.” His expression was so serious that I had a hard time keeping mine the same way.

“I don’t believe you.”

“You’ll have to see won’t you.” The slight challenge in his words had me sitting straighter. Most people think of me as a goody-two-shoes, but for some reason, I felt the need to show Wyatt I wasn’t.

“Fine,” I conceded, rolling my eyes at his smug expression, though

secretly I liked it.

"Do tell," prompted Mila, reminding me that we weren't alone as I turned my head and found three sets of eyes already on me, eyebrows raised. Ignoring the blush warming my cheeks, I took a large swig of my beer before jumping into my story.

"It was my junior year of Uni. Tasha and I decided that since midterms were over, we should celebrate. So along with a few other friends from our floor, we threw our own little party in our dorm room and pretty much got plastered. Someone randomly came up with the idea that we should leave our dorm and go wander around campus in our PJ's," I said, all four of them listening intently.

"Anyways, we are walking around campus drunk off our asses, when someone, I'm not even sure who, decided that we should sneak into the building where the swim team practices."

To this day, I still believe it was Tasha's idea. Back then, hell, even now, she was the one that came up with ideas, or got us into situations that we should definitely not be in.

Honestly, it's a miracle we've never been arrested.

"We snuck inside and headed straight for the pool. Again, since we were severely drunk, we decided to strip and jump in the water. All five of us were swimming around in our underwear, yelling, laughing, and being extremely loud, when suddenly we saw the flashlights of the campus police. We climbed out of that pool so damned fast; we didn't even bother to grab our clothes and booked it out of there so fast." I laughed at the memory.

"There we were, running across campus in nothing but our underwear, laughing our asses off, not really caring that we almost got caught. Anyways, a few days later they announced that only the swim team or those with a special ID could access the swimming area. They even put up a sign asking if anyone knew who was responsible. Of course, none of us said a word to anyone else."

"Wait, that was you!" Mila suddenly exclaimed.

"Hold up, you guys went to the same school?" Bryton interrupted looking between us.

"Honey, catch up. That's old news." Mila waved him off, making me grin at his confused expression.

"For weeks everyone talked about it. We all wanted to know who snuck in," Mila laughed, shaking her head. "Man, that's amazing. They had the pool on lock down for months after that."

"Why do I suddenly have the feeling these two being friends isn't a good idea," Bryton spoke up.

Mila and I shared a grin. "Too late."

I turned to Wyatt with a smug look on my own. "See? Makes your story sound boring by comparison"

“Fine, I’ll give you that one,” he conceded as he leaned across the table again. My body had a mind of its own as it moved to meet him halfway. A quick glance at the others, I found them deep in conversation, ignoring the two of us. Turning back, I held in a small gasp at how close we were. If I moved just another inch our lips would touch.

“But,” The smell of beer and spearmint fanned across my face as he spoke, not entirely unpleasant. “The most important question is what kind of panties you were wearing.” That was the last thing I was expecting to come out of his mouth.

My breathing hitched at his tone. It was so low and raspy, like a gentle caress that made the hairs on my arms stand on end. It suddenly felt a little too hot in the bar as he continued looking at me like he was imagining me in just my underwear. That thought alone had me shifting in my seat. Desire in my belly and all I wanted to do was lean forward another inch and press my lips against his.

Just as I was seconds away from doing just that, Wyatt pulled back. He gave me a playful wink before turning to Trevor, starting up a conversation like he hadn’t just teased me.

“Care to play a game of pool?” Wyatt slid off his stool, offering his hand. The way he looked at me, with his soft smile, had my insides melting like butter.

There go those butterflies again.

“I’d love to.” I placed my hand in his and hopped off my chair. Lacing his fingers through mine, he led me through the small crowd by the bar towards one of the vacant pool tables.

“Just so you know, it’s been ages since I’ve played pool,” I confessed. My last recollection was my sophomore year with Tasha at a bar near campus.

“Don’t worry, I’ll go easy on you,” he winked.

“Just let me warm up and I’ll be kicking your ass.” It was a total lie, but he didn’t need to know that.

“Let's see what you’ve got, lil rebel.” He let go of my hand and grabbed two pool cues, handing me one of them. My competitive side reared its head at his words. Holding my pool cue, I grabbed the little chalk cube and walked around the table. I could feel Wyatt’s gaze on me as I made a show of rubbing the tip of the stick against the chalk. A new sense of confidence came over me as I leaned one hip against the table.

"Want to break first?"

Thankfully the people who played before us put the balls in the rack.

"Sure," he said as he walked around me, and purposely brushing my back as he passed. I couldn't take my eyes off him as he lined up his cue with the white ball, bending at the waist.

Damn, he looks good.

It was completely unfair. All he was doing was leaning over a pool table, yet it looked like he was posing for a photoshoot. Even through his long-sleeve shirt I could see the muscles in his arms tensing. I was so focused on my ogling that I blanked as he drew his arm back, then drove the cue forwards, hitting the balls with a satisfying *clack*. The balls scattered across the green felt, and two instantly sank in the far-right corner pocket.

"I'm solid," he grinned.

"Yes, you are," I muttered.

I'm about to make a total fool of myself.

My eyes were glued to him as he prowled around the table. He moved just as gracefully off the ice as he did on it. I looked like a newborn calf compared to him. When Wyatt missed his next shot, I was a little disappointed that it was finally my turn.

Acting like I knew what I was doing, I looked around the table.

It's just like pool on iPhone games, you've got this.

My inner pep talk helped a little as I moved to line up what I thought looked like an easy shot. Cheekily, I made a point of bending over directly in front of him as he stood back and watched.

I could feel those blue eyes on me, and I smirked to myself as I made a show of lining up my shot. As I struck the ball with my cue, it was a bit awkward, but luck was on my side. Somehow, I managed to send my ball directly into a pocket. It took everything I had to refrain from cheering at sinking a ball, pretending not to notice the way Wyatt's eyes followed me around the table.

My next shot I missed.

I didn't mind, because it gave me another opportunity to watch Wyatt. I could always play off that I was watching his 'technique', and not his rock-hard ass as he bent over.

As we kept playing, the tension between us grew to the point that all my senses were on edge. Every time I bent over, I felt his gaze. Every time he passed by his hand would graze my lower back or the side of my hand. My skin tingled with each touch, wanting more.

When I lined up for my next shot, there were only a few balls left —all but one were mine. I was once again bent over the table when I felt more than just a pair of eyes behind me.

I kept perfectly still as his big, muscular, body descended against

mine, gently pressing against my back. Warm breath fanned the side of my neck and cheek sending a shiver along my spine.

"Here, let me show you." His voice was low. Seductive. Strong hands wrapped around mine as I gripped the pool cue.

"Hold it a bit tighter here." His hand squeezed my right one as he instructed. "This is where the power comes from." I was trying my absolute hardest to concentrate on the game and not the dirty thoughts running through my mind.

Stubble tickled my cheek as Wyatt bent his head closer to mine. His left hand gently moved my fingers to where they formed a triangle near the top of the cue.

"Helps you keep the stick in a straight line," Wyatt instructed.

I swallowed thickly at the way his muscular thighs were pressed against the back of mine, gently but firmly. My ass was wedged perfectly against his crotch as he bent over me.

"When you aim, focus on the ball you want to sink in the pocket." The heady scent of his cologne made it difficult to concentrate even more. All I had to do was shift my hips, just a little, and I'd be grinding against him. My cheeks warmed at the thought.

I missed what he said next but nodded like I heard.

"Ready?" His lips were right next to my ear making me shiver again. Not trusting myself to speak, I just nodded.

I love the sound of his voice. I would drown in it if I could.

Wyatt kept his hands on top of mine and helped guide the pool stick back. We held it there for just a second before pushing the cue forward, striking the ball and sinking it in the pocket.

His hands moved from mine, but instead of stepping back, Wyatt placed them on the edge of the table on either side of my hips. His forearms brushed against my waist, keeping me caged against the table.

Not that I'm complaining.

"Good job," he murmured in my ear, the sound traveling down my waist and into my pussy. I ran my teeth over my bottom lip to stop any inappropriate sound from coming out of my mouth. He hardly touched me, yet I was reduced to a panting bitch in heat.

Wyatt remained in place for another moment before he cleared his throat and extracted himself from me. I swore he purposely dragged his forearms up my sides, as the weight of his body against mine disappeared.

I felt the absence immediately as he stepped back. The whimper that left my lips was borderline embarrassing as I straightened, hoping he hadn't heard it. I knew my face was bright red as I cleared my throat trying my damnedest not to appear affected.

But as I glanced over my shoulder at Wyatt, who leaned back

against another pool table with his arms crossed against his chest as he smirked, told me I was doing a shit job at it.

JOSIE

"Thanks for letting me tag along," I said, as our little group made our way out to the parking lot.

"Of course! I'm now going to force you to come to every game with me," Mila declared loudly as she gripped Bryton's arm. "Finally! A girl who isn't a bitch. I want to keep you. Can we keep her?" She added, looking up at her boyfriend with a pouty look.

I held back a laugh at Bryton's bewildered expression.

"Uh, sure?"

"Yay!" She detached herself from him and flew right into me. I would have fallen if it wasn't for the sturdy strength of Wyatt behind me. Mila wrapped her arms around me in a tight bear hug, my own wrapping around her to keep her upright. "Now you're stuck with me."

"Okay, babe, I think you can let her go now." Bryton came forward and unhooked her from me, shooting me an apologetic look over her head. I just smiled.

"Text me tomorrow, bestie." Mila planted a kiss on my cheek and let me go, Bryton wrapped his arms around her waist.

"I will," I said with a grin.

"Bye guys," Bryton nodded at Wyatt and Trevor. "Good to see you again, Josie."

"You too." I watched as he gently led an intoxicated Mila to their car. She continued chatting away without a care in the world.

"Got to love a drunk Mila," Trevor laughed. "That's my cue to go, too." I stepped aside as he and Wyatt did their bro-handshake thing guys always seemed to do.

"It was nice getting to know you a bit better, Josie." Surprising me, Trevor bent down and hugged me. He was even taller than Wyatt, and I felt tiny compared to him—my head only came to his chest.

True to Mila's word, Trevor was a nice guy. Sure, he was intimidating as hell on the ice, but off it, once you got past his bravado, he was a softy. His jibes back and forth with Mila were entertaining as hell. It was easy to see that Trevor was the life of any party, and someone you instantly liked being around.

With the others now gone, it was just Wyatt and me. All night, I'd

tried to ignore the tension between the two of us. The two games of pool we'd played were almost torturous—both of which I lost. While Wyatt limited his physical contact during the second game, he'd continued his little touches every time he brushed past me. Every shot I made he'd murmur 'good job' which just turned me on further.

It was hard enough to fight against the increasing sexual energy between us when his friends were around, but now that we were alone once more, it was damn near impossible. Especially with the way his hand caressed the small of my back as he guided me towards his car.

Like a gentleman, he opened the passenger door for me, waiting for me to slip into the seat, before shutting it after me. Eagerly, I watched him walk around the front of the car and gracefully fold his lean body into the driver's seat.

"How did you like the game tonight?" Wyatt asked once he'd pulled out into the street, heading in the direction of our apartment building.

"It was amazing being so close to the ice. Way more intense than watching it on T.V."

"You mean you've never been to a game before?" He glanced over at me in surprise.

I shook my head. "Growing up, we never really had the money to go. So, my dad and I made it our tradition to watch the games on the television together. So today was like ticking off a bucket-list item for both of us."

"Well, I am glad you came."

"You played amazingly." I switched the subject.

"It felt…good tonight. Like the old me," he confessed.

"I know it's hard coming back with an injury but," I glanced over at him in the dim dashboard light. "You were born to be on the ice."

I wasn't sure how much my words meant to him, but it was important to me that he knew that. Seeing him play in person was magical. I'd been so caught up in my feelings for him, that it had momentarily escaped me that he was one of the best ice-hockey players of this generation. I couldn't possibly find the words to describe how great a player he was.

He just needs to believe in himself again.

"Maybe you're my good luck charm," he murmured.

"Maybe I am," I teased. "Should I bring a huge sign to the next game? Make sure you can see me in the crowd?"

"For sure. How does *Wyatt Boone is the best hockey player in the world,* sound?"

"Best player in the world? Hm, that's quite the stretch."

"Did you not see the winning goal in the final seconds?" His eyes

darted back and forth between the road to me and back again.

"Eh, it was okay," I shrugged, trying my best to keep my expression neutral. "Now Trevor on the other hand."

Wyatt's hand left the gear shift as he reached over and grabbed my knee, causing me to jerk at his touch.

"Want to say that again?"

"Trevor," It was all I managed to get out before he squeezed my knee so that I almost jumped out of my seat. I put a hand over my mouth to stifle my laugh as I squirmed in my seat. "Okay, okay fine!" I giggled.

"I thought so." He released the pressure on my knee but kept his hand there.

"I didn't pick you to play dirty." I said with a playful pout, but he just shrugged, the corners of his lips curving up.

Turning my attention to the streets rolling past my window, we drove in comfortable silence for a few minutes before he spoke again.

"Why do you do that?"

"Do what?" I frowned, unsure what he was talking about. "Cover your mouth when you laugh," he elaborated.

Oh.

I thought I'd gotten myself out of the habit, but sometimes I still caught myself doing it—especially if I felt nervous.

And Wyatt definitely makes me feel nervous. Among other things.

Wyatt waited patiently for me to answer, and I struggled to word the explanation.

"My ex—the one I told you about," I didn't want to say his name, but out of the corner of my eye I saw Wyatt nod. "He once told me my laugh was too loud. I sort of got in the habit of covering my mouth so it wouldn't be," I said with a shrug, trying my hardest to play it off like the words still didn't hurt me. Like they didn't still sting, even after all this time.

I remember the moment like it was yesterday. The sneer on my ex's face as he told me I laughed like a donkey and that I was just as unattractive. He had a way with words that made them hurt more than any physical blows. From that point on, I became so self-conscious about it. When I did find something to laugh about, I took to covering my mouth and pressing my lips together. Until eventually, I just stopped laughing.

Stopped smiling.

It took a long time for me to break the habit, to allow myself to laugh freely, but every once in a while, his voice popped back into my head, making me self-conscious all over again.

Wyatt slowed to a stop at a red light and took the opportunity to turn in his seat so that he faced me. "I hope you know you don't have

to hide anything from me, especially your laugh. Even if you had the world's most annoying laugh, I'd still want to hear it."

My heart did something funny in my chest as he spoke. His tone was so gentle, so sincere, that I knew he meant every word.

"You don't have to worry about hiding with me, okay?" Wyatt ducked his head just enough so I could see his features more clearly. Swallowing the lump in my throat I nodded. Seemingly satisfied with my answer, he gave my knee a soft squeeze before turning back to the road.

AS WE RODE the elevator to my floor, hand in hand, I silently wished time would slow down. I didn't want the night to end. Seeing him play, hanging out with him and his friends, it was such an amazing night. I felt like I was in a dream that I never wanted to wake from.

"I had a great time tonight. Thank you again for inviting me to come see you play," I said as we reached my door. I knew that the moment I stepped into my apartment, my magical evening was over. So, instead, I tried to drag it out as long as I could.

"Anytime." Wyatt's thumb rubbed softly across the top of my knuckles. He hadn't let go of my hand from the moment we got out of the car. I loved it. Love how my hand fit perfectly in his.

I turned so that my back was to the door, keeping his hand clasped in mine. My eyes slowly moved up his chest to his face, my neck tilting back to meet his gaze.

"Do you want to do something tomorrow?" He asked.

"Are you asking me out on a date, Mr. Boone?"

"I am," he replied without hesitation.

Secretly, I'd hoped he would ask me out, but now that he had, it felt surreal. I hoped it was confirmation that he also felt whatever this was between us. For the first time in a very long time, all I wanted was to jump in feet first and see what happened.

"I would love to."

"Okay, cool," he ducked his head as he smiled, and I was certain I saw him blush. I smiled, knowing that I might just make him feel as nervous as he made me. "I'll pick you up around noon. Does that work?"

"Sounds good," I replied, already mentally calculating the hours until then.

We stood before my door, staring at each other. My eyes unconsciously dipped to his lips before moving back to his eyes. All I

wanted was for him to kiss me. To *finally* feel those lips against mine. The same ones I'd dreamt about last night, causing me to wake up gasping for air, thighs slick from the dirty dream.

I barely noticed Wyatt's hand dropping mine, too busy watching the way his blue eyes seemed to darken. He brought his hand up, fingers gently tucking a stray piece of hair behind my ear. The tips of his fingers grazed my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. The way he looked at me made my breath hitch. When my eyes moved back to his lips, my tongue darted out as I absently licked my own, imagining how his lips would feel pressed against my own.

His fingers trailed a path down my cheek. The touch was so soft I found myself leaning my face against his hand, craving more of it. With our eyes locked, Wyatt took a small step forward, and as I moved back, I felt my back press against my apartment door.

Wyatt cupped the side of my face, his thumb tucked under my chin, tilting my face up a little bit more. His eyes left mine as he dipped his head. I didn't have time to take a breath before I felt the gentle caress of his lips against the crook of my neck.

My eyelids fluttered as my hands gripped the front of his shirt as he trailed his lips ever so slowly up my neck. The touch was soft, almost like a whisper as he worked his way upwards.

My toes curled in my shoes as his lips ghosted up my throat to my jaw. I was gripping his shirt so tightly in my fists, I was certain it would be stretched out when I let go. As Wyatt's lips moved up to the corner of my own, barely touching, a small whimper escaped me.

"Is this okay?" he whispered.

"Mmhm." My brain was no longer functioning enough to form real sentences. Not when his 6 '2, hot-as-sin body, was pressing mine against the door, igniting a fire in my lower belly.

And he hasn't even fully kissed me yet.

"I want to kiss you," he said, finally saying what I wanted to hear. It took everything I had not to reach up and yank his head down to mine.

Although if he doesn't kiss me right this second, I may have to.

"Then kiss me," I managed to say, and I trembled as I felt his lips curl into a smile against my cheek.

"So demanding." Wyatt turned my head to the side with his thumb. His lips hovered over mine, eliciting an embarrassing sound from me.

As his lips finally met mine, I all but melted. It was all I could do to remain standing. The kiss was soft at first, as if Wyatt was just testing the waters. He tasted like a mix of beer and spearmint, two things I never thought would go together, yet strangely did.

I pressed my front against his, needing to close any gap between us

as he angled my head to deepen the kiss. When he swiped his tongue across the seam of my lips, I eagerly opened my mouth. Yet, instead of feeling his tongue against mine, Wyatt gently tugged my bottom lip between his teeth.

A low groan surged up my throat and I was helpless to stop it as I arched against him. With one hand pressed against the door above my head and his other hand cupping my face, I felt cocooned.

As we grew sure of each other, the kiss became deeper, rougher, as though whatever had held us back had finally snapped. Wyatt's lips took mine, as if branding me. I could feel his kiss right through to my very bones, and it was like no kiss I'd ever had before. I never wanted it to stop—never wanted his lips to leave mine.

By the time Wyatt pulled back, I felt lightheaded and breathless, as though he'd sucked all the oxygen from my lungs. He rested his forehead against mine as the two of us caught our breath. I kept my eyes closed, lips tingling. There were no words to describe what just happened.

"You're all consuming, Josie," Wyatt mumbled softly, his lips softly grazing mine as he spoke before he pulled his head away.

"In a good or bad way?" I breathed.

"Good. Definitely good." My heart fluttered at the words.

"I better go before I do something I shouldn't," he said as he dragged his thumb across my bottom lip, his eyes tracking the movement. I didn't want him to go. I wanted to pull him into my apartment and continue what we'd started, but I knew he was right. I wasn't the type to jump into bed with someone so quickly, even if that person made me feel things I hadn't felt before.

I don't want to ruin anything by moving too quickly, so it's probably for the best that we end the night here.

"Okay," I agreed, though every inch of my body protested.

He took a step back, his hand falling from my face as I forced myself to release his shirt. I already missed the feel of him pressed against me, and I knew I'd think of nothing else for the rest of the night. Wyatt was an addiction I knew I could easily get hooked on.

"I'll see you tomorrow." He looked reluctant to leave as he took another step back. "Goodnight, Josie."

"Goodnight, Wyatt."

As he turned and headed towards the elevator, I stood there, watching him, my lips tingling. It took all my willpower not to run after him and pull him in for another kiss. Before he could disappear, I quickly called out.

"Don't get stuck!"

The grin he flashed over his shoulder mirrored my own. "Don't worry. Batman doesn't get stuck."

I laughed under my breath at our inside joke, and with a wink, the elevator doors closed, and Wyatt disappeared from view.

With a smile so wide my cheeks ached, I turned and entered my apartment.

Tomorrow can’t come fast enough.

WYATT

I could still taste Josie on my lips as I let myself into my apartment, the taste of beer and coconut from her Chapstick clouding my senses. The smell of her perfume clung my clothes, the peachy-citrus scent quickly becoming my new favorite smell.

It took all my inner strength to not go back downstairs and knock on her door, just to kiss her again. Kissing her felt like breathing for the first time, and I'd felt an almost physical ache pulling away from her. It was like I'd never known I was drowning until she breathed life back into me.

I should feel exhausted, but all I could think about was Josie. The truth is, she was all I'd thought about since we met. Well, that and hockey. It was hard to believe only a week had passed since we found ourselves trapped in the elevator. Now that I'd met her, it blew my mind that we'd lived in the same building for a year, that I could have met her sooner.

Seeing her at the game, cheering me on, was indescribable. Seeing her in *my* jersey. Sure, my family stood in the stands at most of my games, cheering me on and wearing my number as they watched me play. But having Josie there felt different. She wasn't obligated to come and support me, yet she did.

I hated to admit it, but for the first time in my life, I wasn't one hundred percent focused on the game. I switched spots on the bench with one of the guys during the game so I could lean to the side and see her. More than once Trevor or Bryton hit my shoulder to get my attention.

Knowing she sat in the stands, watching, lit a fire within me that I hadn't felt in a long time. For the first time this season, I hadn't worried about my knee, losing another game or worrying about trying to maintain my reputation. Instead, I skated out onto the ice and put everything on the line.

I played like I did before my injury, and it felt amazing. Then there was breaking our losing streak. For a while there, I feared I'd forgotten what winning felt like. To feel that rush of adrenaline, that explosive feeling when you shoot the winning goal, the sound of fans cheering your name.

Tonight reinforced the love I have for what I do.

I have Josie to thank for that.

Tossing my keys on the counter, I made my way towards my room. Even though I took a shower after the game I needed to take another one to loosen up my muscles before bed. I knew I'd probably regret not taking an ice bath right after the game, but I was too eager to see Josie.

On the way to my ensuite, I slid my shoes off and put them in my closet. It was a habit after years of my mom nagging at me to put my shoes away and keep my room clean and tidy. As an adult I'd learned my mom was right about keeping a clean house—not that I'd admit that to her. When I was younger, it used to take me ages to find my hockey pucks and skates because my room was a mess. With my own place I made sure everything had its place.

With the shower started, I tugged my shirt up and over my head. My pants, boxers and socks followed before I stepped under the warm water.

I ducked my head under the waterfall shower head, letting it run down my face for a moment. There was no getting Josie off my mind. How her lips felt. Tasted. Her reaction when I bit her lip. I could still hear the little whimper she made.

My cock twitched under the stream of water at the recollection, and I found myself wondering how soft and receptive she would be if I did more than kiss her. I thought about Josie beneath me, our naked bodies pressed against each other, and I grew harder with each passing second. I couldn't stand it any longer as I reached down and gripped my cock in my hand.

I'd had half a hard-on ever since Josie bent over the damn pool table at the bar. Her perfect ass encased in those tight jeans. At first, I tried not to stare, to be a gentleman and not objectify her. Shit, I only had so much self-control. How could I *not* stare at her ass when it was right in front of me?

My throaty groan echoed off the tiles as I slowly stroked my cock, pausing briefly to reach for a little soap. I was no longer in control of my thoughts, or anything else for that matter as I imagined Josie on her knees before me, staring down into her gorgeous brown eyes that silently begged to have my cock deep in her throat. I wanted to bend her over, to watch her grip her ass open as I pounded away at her from behind, my thumb pushing into her ass while she begged me to fuck it next.

My hand stroked faster, wrist twisting at the base before sliding back up. Water hit my back as I leaned my other hand against the shower tile. My abs tightened as my hips involuntarily fucked my hand. As my groans grew louder, I tightened my grip, wishing it was

Josie instead. *Her* hand. *Her* mouth. *Her* pussy. The images froze in my mind as I felt nearing the edge.

All it took was a few more thrusts of my hips, and I ejaculated across the shower tiles before me. Every muscle in my body tensed, my eyes squeezed shut as I gave my cock a final jerk.

Resting my forehead against the tiles, my cock twitched in my hand as I tried to catch my breath. It took a minute for my legs to stop shaking.

I can't remember the last time I came that hard on my own.

Guilt worked its way through me as I straightened up, letting the water wash away the evidence.

I shouldn't have done that while picturing Josie. I tried to be a gentleman earlier and here I am jerking off to the thought of her.

One thing I did know was that I hadn't imagined the attraction and lust in Josie's eyes as we'd stood outside her apartment. It wasn't just my ego speaking, but I was certain that if we'd kept kissing, she would have dragged me into her apartment. Not that I would have argued. I just wished she was actually in the shower with me.

I quickly rinsed off and stepped out of the shower, grabbing a towel to dry off. At least jerking off eased some of the pent-up post-game energy. Drying off, I walked naked back to my room and pulled on a pair of boxers. I could hear my phone buzzing away on my bed, reminding me I'd switched it to silent before we went to the bar. Like hell I'd waste time on my phone when Josie was right in front of me.

I wasn't surprised to see multiple texts from my brothers congratulating me on a win. Of course, they wouldn't be messages from Landon and Mateo without their special form of sarcasm thrown into it. There was also an apologetic message from mom, disappointed to miss the game. I would have loved for her to be there, to see me make the winning goal, but it wasn't often she missed a game. She almost always came to a game.

I scrolled through the group chat I had with the team, rolling my eyes at some of the shit they'd sent over the course of the evening. Mostly wanting to know who wanted to go out and get plastered, with the usual follow-ups about fucking some hockey bunny. There were a few asking where Trevor, Bryton and I were at. Typically, after a win we'd venture out as a team, but that was the last thing I'd wanted to do tonight. Clicking out of the group message my eyes immediately went to Josie's earlier texts. I stared at the last message she'd sent me.

Josie: Good luck tonight! You're going to kick ass!

My thumb hovered over the call button. All I wanted was to hear her voice, even though it was less than an hour since we'd said

goodnight. Before I could stop myself, I hit the call button and tapped to put it on speaker.

I didn't know why, but I felt nervous.

Since when does Wyatt Boone get nervous about a girl?

I think the last time was back in high school when I asked a girl to prom.

As the phone rang, I realized there was a good chance she was already in bed, and I silently cursed myself for calling her so late. Just as I was about to hang up, she answered.

"Hi." Her voice was soft, almost timid.

"Hi," I replied lamely. Clearing my throat, I shifted on the edge of my bed. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"All good, I was just changing into my pajamas."

Of course my perverted-ass mind started picturing her in some form of skimpy PJ's that showcased her long, toned legs. I bit my tongue so that I wouldn't ask her out aloud.

That would be a sure-fire way to get her to hang up on me.

I could hear her shuffling like she was getting into bed. Now that I had her on the phone, I wasn't sure what to say. It was like my brain shut down, incapable of making simple conversation.

"You know, it's been a week since we got stuck in the elevator," I said after a moment.

"Oh, that's right. This time last week we were arguing over the best cereal."

"Still can't believe you think Cinnamon Toast Crunch is the best." I shook my head although she couldn't see me.

"Um, that's because it *is*. At least we can both agree that Frosted Mini Wheats are the worst."

"Who even eats those?" I agreed, moving back onto my bed. "It's like eating cardboard.

At the sound of her laughing, I smiled.

There. That's what I needed to hear.

I liked her laugh. A lot. Earlier when she'd confessed why she covered her mouth when she laughed, I'd wanted nothing more than to track her ex down and beat the shit out of him.

What man…no, what boy says something like that to a woman? Especially one like Josie.

I meant every word I'd said to her in the car. I don't want her to hide her laugh or anything about herself from me. I wanted to see and learn everything there was to know about her—a fact that was scary as fuck.

"So, lil rebel. Are we going to talk about that drunk story you told us at the bar?" I questioned. Josie groaned and I could practically see her covering her face with her free hand.

“Let’s not.”

“No, let’s,” I grinned to myself. “Breaking and entering…that’s a serious crime, Ms. Scott.”

“Technically it wasn’t breaking and entering if the building wasn’t locked properly.”

“Wonder what they’d do if they got an anonymous call detailing who did it?” I teased. “Is there a reward?”

“You wouldn’t dare!” she gasped dramatically, and I had to clamp my hand over my mouth to hold back the laughter.

“Who’s to say it would come from me? There were others there tonight that heard it,” I pointed out.

“Trevor wouldn’t do that to me.”

I had a feeling letting Trevor and Josie become friends was going to bite me in the ass. I saw the smug look on his face earlier when we came out of the locker room, and he put his arm around her. He knew it would piss me off, which of course it did. I also knew he was going to tease me non-stop about it next time I saw him.

“Trevor can’t save you now.”

“You have no evidence Mr. Boone.”

“We’ll see lil rebel” I teased, smiling as she laughed on the other side of the phone. Her nickname was starting to fit her more and more.

My phone buzzed in my hand, drawing my attention to the ESPN notification. I couldn’t help but click on it.

Toronto Knights break their losing streak by winning against the New York Huskies 3-2. Captain Wyatt Boone has returned to form as he dominated the ice. The Big Three—Boone, Hall and Young were the lead scores in tonight's game.

I ignored the dig about our previous losses and continued reading the article as it listed stats and different plays throughout the game. I typically try not to read articles about the game. Especially if we’d lost. I’d learned the hard way that all it did was tear you down further.

“Wyatt?”

I was so caught up in reading the article, that I’d forgotten Josie was on the other line.

Smooth move, dickhead.

“Sorry, I was reading an article on ESPN about the game.”

“Was it good or bad?”

“Not too bad. Slight dig at me but I’m used to it.” You can’t play a sport at a professional level and not be able to take criticism. Especially from the press.

“Random question,” Josie started. “Is it hard having to sit at an after-game interview after a loss?”

“Yeah, it is. Reporters rub your nose in your shitty performance. Trust me, no one wants to sit there and have your mistakes repeatedly shoved back in your face—and then have to read about it online afterwards,” I sighed. “But it’s the price you pay to do something you love. The sting never goes away, you just learn to move on from it.”

“Well, I thought you were amazing tonight. That last slap shot was insane. The way you, Trevor and Bryton moved down the ice,” Josie all but gushed.

I leaned back against my pillows listening to her recount moments of the game. I’ve never had a girl know anything about hockey. Puck bunnies pretend to know so they can sleep with players, which doesn’t count. The one serious girlfriend I had in high school only went to a few games and spent most of the time on her phone.

So, listening to Josie know what she was talking about was…I didn’t even have the words for it. I could listen to her talk about hockey all day long. Or just talk in general, if I was to be honest.

“So aside from hockey, what else do you like to do?” I asked, fishing for some ideas for our date tomorrow. I hadn’t planned on asking her out the way I did.

“Hmm, that’s a loaded question.” She shuffled once more. I pictured her getting comfortable on her bed, phone lying next to her like mine was.

“I love photography, which is a given. There’s this amazing art display at *Gallery 460* downtown. It’s supposed to be amazing,” Josie said, her passion evident in her voice. I wished I was talking to her in person so I could witness the way she lit up when she talked about something she loved.

As she continued telling me about the gallery, an idea came to mind. It could be a long shot, but if I pulled it off…with my phone still on speaker, I scrolled through my contacts. When I found the one, I was looking for, I quickly typed out a message and hit send. I knew it was late, but I needed to have everything in place before I picked Josie up for our date tomorrow.

JOSIE

Wyatt: Wear something comfortable and warm.

I checked Wyatt's text for the hundredth time in the last half hour. When I woke up an hour ago, the text was already waiting for me. I texted him back asking what he had planned for our date today, but the man was tight lipped about it.

What the hell does warm and comfortable even mean?

This was our first date, so obviously I wanted to look nice, which was hard to do with little-to-no information on what we were doing. Although, I had to admit I was excited to see what he was so secretive about.

Needing help with an outfit, I wasted no time grabbing my phone and Face Timing Tasha. The phone only rang twice before her face popped up on the screen.

"I need help," I said before Tasha could even utter a word.

"Hello to you too."

"Wyatt is taking me out on a date in an hour and I have no clue what to wear."

"Did he tell you what you guys are doing?"

"He sent me a text that said to wear something comfortable and warm. Like that's any help." I moved to prop my phone up on my vanity, so it was facing my closet.

"No other hint?"

"None."

"That's actually kinda cute. He has a whole thing planned."

I glanced over to find Tasha grinning through the phone. I could tell she was walking, and she sounded a little out of breath.

"Where are you?"

"Just left hot yoga."

"Oh shit! I totally forgot!" The two of us had made plans to try out a new hot yoga class this morning. Of course, the only reason Tasha got me to agree to go was the promise that we'd hit the bakery around the corner afterwards. They had *the* best cinnamon rolls. But I'd completely forgotten between last night's game and my mental breakdown about my first date with Wyatt.

“You’re all good.” Tasha waved me off. Her blonde ponytail swinging behind her. “You got a hot date to get ready for. Did he ask you last night?”

“He walked me to my door and then asked me.” I’d replayed that moment in my head a dozen times since last night…and the kiss. Even now, just thinking about it had my toes curling in my carpet. It was without a doubt the best kiss I’d had in my entire life.

“What’s the dreamy look for?” Tasha teased, and I felt my cheeks flush at having been caught daydreaming.

“Nothing,” I mumbled, turning away from the camera.

“You don’t get to play Miss Nonchalant. Spill.” Her gray eyes pierced through the screen. There was no stopping the smile that swept over my face.

Tasha gasped before she broke out in a smile of her own.

“He kissed you! I knew it! The sexual tension between the two of you was insane last night.”

My cheeks flamed as Tasha continued. “Was it good? He looks like the type of guy who knows how to kiss.”

“You could say that…” I teased. I’d forgotten what it was like to have a man in your life to talk about. My last ‘relationship’ was so fleeting. A small blimp in my life. So, to actually be squealing with my best friend over a kiss felt good. Normal.

“Was it the kind of kiss that made you wet?” she asked.

“Tasha!” I pretended to be shocked to hide the fact she was right on the mark.

“What? As your best friend, I’m allowed to ask that.”

“It was a good kiss. Like, *really* good.”

“I’m not surprised. I was only with the two of you for a few minutes and I could cut the attraction between you with a knife. It’s a wonder nothing happened in the elevator when you guys got stuck.”

I smiled. It was validating to know that the attraction I felt between Wyatt and myself wasn’t just in my head.

“I’m thrilled you’re going on a date," Tasha said.

“That is if I can find an outfit in time,” I grumbled.

“Lucky for you, I know your closet inside and out.” She wasted no time in listing off outfit options for me to wear and within the span of three minutes, I had three outfit choices.

This is why I called her.

“Was everything okay last night?” I asked as I slid out of my pajama bottoms. Tasha and I had lived together and seen each other half naked enough times to not be fazed undressing in front of one another.

When Tasha said it was a work emergency, I knew what it was. Her parents.

“My parents wanted to have some late dinner thing; you know how it is.”

That I did. Tasha’s parents are…something. I’ve only met them a few times, despite being friends with Tasha for years now. On the outside they seemed cordial, but in conversation they had this talent for making digs about you while making it sound like they were being friendly.

Tasha’s parents were two of the most sought after attorneys in Toronto. Their law-firm was the biggest in the city and their clientele were all over the world.

As ‘members of high society’, they enjoyed showing off that they gave back to the community, so every year they held a gala for all the rich people to attend. Make them feel like they were doing good when it really was just to show off.

The one time I went with Tasha to the gala, they repeatedly made comments about my *lower-class* status, and that Tasha should have brought someone that wouldn’t make them look bad. I was fine with the comments, but when they voiced their disappointment in Tasha multiple times it took everything I had not to snap at them.

I haven’t seen them since that night. I don’t know how Tasha turned out to be such an amazing person with parents like that. Knowing she didn’t want to talk about them, I changed the subject.

“You know Trevor was asking about you last night.” I peeked in her direction as I pulled on a soft gray sweater.

“Oh?”

“He seemed curious about you.”

“There’s a lot to be curious about,” Tasha flashed me a grin that was all teeth.

Tasha is gorgeous. With long, dirty blonde hair that she’s dyed a million times, and steel-gray eyes that caught you off guard. A dimple on one cheek always got men's attention, so too did the smattering of freckles that graced her nose and cheeks when she’d spent too much time in the sun.

At Uni, whenever we passed guys on our way to a lecture, almost every single one would stop and stare at her strutting past. I’d lost count how many times guys hit on her whenever we went out for drinks or clubbing.

“He’s kind of your type,” I prompted.

The look that passed over her face was one I was all too familiar with. I knew how she was with guys. Tasha was the chew-them-up-and-spit-them-out type. Most were lucky to last a few weeks. Then again, Trevor seemed like that type too. Them getting to know each other could either be a total disaster, or the best thing that had happened to either of them.

“Mmm, we’ll see. Besides, we’re not here to talk about my love life, though. Now twirl,” she instructed as she wagged her finger at me through the camera.

Leaving my phone propped up, I stepped back until Tasha could see me in profile. I’d settled on simplicity and comfort, pairing a cute pair of jeans with a gray sweater. I figured it was practical, given that I had no idea what Wyatt had planned, but the jeans also made my ass look great.

“Perfect. You should wear those nice, heeled boots you have, too.”

“Good idea,” I replied, as I disappeared from her view.

It took me a minute of rummaging in the back of my closet to find said boots, too distracted by thoughts of seeing Wyatt. As the clock ticked closer to noon, the more nervous I felt. It was more excitement than anything. A nervous excitement. I wanted to spend more time with him. I’d gotten a good sense of who he was outside of hockey, and I liked what I saw.

Tasha stayed on FaceTime with me while I finished getting ready. She knew me well enough to know when I was nervous, and I appreciated that she was doing her best to keep my mind off of it. Even if that meant proceeding to tell me all about the hot yoga class, even though we both knew I had no interest in it.

“Seriously, Josie, you should have seen it. This older lady kept cursing because she claimed someone had stolen her mat. Then there was this other girl that made these strange moaning noises with every change of position.”

“I thought yoga was supposed to be a calming experience?” I laughed.

By the time I’d finished curling my hair and applying some light makeup, I felt calmer.

“You look great, Jo.”

“Thanks for helping me get ready.” I shot her a grateful smile.

“Any time,” she said with a wink before her voice took on a more serious tone. “Have fun today. If Wyatt wants to spoil you, let him do it. You deserve to go out and have some fun.”

I nodded thoughtfully. It’d been a rough year and for so long I’d felt like I couldn’t go out and have fun. Without Tasha and Lydia coaxing me out to do things, I’d probably become a hermit in my apartment.

“Remember our code word?” Tasha asked.

“Anchovies.” The two of us shared a grin. We came up with our code word in Uni—something weird that we could say to get each other's attention during some social gathering when one of us didn’t feel comfortable or just wanted to get away. Needless to say, the conversation took place in our dorm room while eating pizza, and

anchovies just stuck.

"Call or text me and I'll drop everything to come get you."

"I love you, T."

"I love you too, Jo."

Right on cue, I heard a knock at my front door.

He's early.

"Have fun and call me later." With an encouraging smile, Tasha ended the call.

Grabbing my phone, I hurried to the door as I did my best to calm the fluttering butterflies in my stomach. As my hand gripped the doorknob, I paused, forcing myself to take a deep breath before I opened the door. At the sight of Wyatt, I swallowed thickly, the butterflies in my stomach swarming.

How is it possible that he looks even hotter than he did last night?

My gaze ran over him, taking in the fitted light blue sweater that brought out his eyes, and the slim-fit, dark jeans that showed off his muscular legs. He literally looked like a model.

No wonder he's named one of hockey's hottest players.

"Hey," I breathed, forcing myself to look him in the eye.

"Hey back. You look great," he said. I loved the way he didn't hide the fact he was checking me out.

"Thanks. You do too."

As he brought his gaze back up to meet mine, his mischievous half-smile made me a little weak in the knees.

"Ready to go?" he asked.

"Sure am. Just let me grab my purse really quick."

Not wanting to make him wait, I quickly walked into the living room and grabbed my handbag off the counter.

Stepping into the hall, I locked my door and turned to Wyatt, my nerves and excitement rising in equal parts.

"Feel like chancing the elevator again?" Wyatt asked, extending his hand.

"I'm game if you are." I placed my hand in his and let him lead me towards the elevator. His hand was firm and solid, his callouses pressed against the soft palm of my own. I gave it a little squeeze as I tilted my head back slightly to look at him. "Lead the way."

JOSIE

"I have a few things planned for today if you're up for it." Wyatt glanced over at me as he steered his car out of the parking lot.

"Definitely. What do you have in mind?"

"It's a surprise."

"Color me intrigued." I loved that he'd put thought into our date, that he'd made an effort. It was something I hadn't experienced in a long time.

"How'd you sleep by the way?" Wyatt asked, and I smiled in response, thinking about the surprise, late-night phone call. It had only lasted about an hour before we started drifting off to sleep. I'm not sure who fell asleep first, but when I woke up a few hours later my phone had died.

"I slept well. How about you?" I asked.

"Same." He glanced over at me, smiling. "Although I got a kick out of learning you talk in your sleep."

Instantly my cheeks burned, and I covered them with my hands.

Shit!

I wasn't someone who simply uttered the odd mumble in my sleep. No. I had full on conversations. More than once when I lived with Tasha, she'd woken me up from my constant chattering.

My ex even bought himself earplugs for whenever I stayed over, and the ghostly memory of his words echoed through my mind as I peeked over at Wyatt.

It's so annoying. Why can't you just stop it?

"I'm so sorry! Please tell me I didn't say anything embarrassing," I pleaded.

"Nothing embarrassing, I promise. Just what an amazing hockey player I am."

"I did not!"

"You definitely did. You were like, *'Wyatt's the best player in the history of the game'*." His slightly higher pitch was a clear attempt at teasing.

Two can play that game.

"I think you must have misheard Wyatt instead of Gretzky," I teased right back.

“True. The two do sound similar.”

I laughed, enjoying the fact that we could enjoy a joke together.

“In all seriousness, you didn’t say anything bad. I only heard a mumble or two.”

“I’ve been known to say weird things in my sleep. I once called Tasha’s name for like ten minutes.”

“Bet she loved that.”

“Oh, she did. Especially at three in the morning. Poor Tasha—I don’t know how she managed to live with me for years. Though just so you know, I don’t talk in my sleep every night.”

“Well, lucky for you, I don’t mind either way.”

I raised an eyebrow as I peered at him. “You’re saying you wouldn’t mind me waking you up in the middle of the night by talking in my sleep?”

“Not one bit. I happen to like the sound of your voice.” Wyatt said it so casually, and yet, his words pierced my heart, sending a tingling warmth throughout my body.

“Aren’t you a charmer?” I said lightly, trying my best not to let him see how flustered I was by a simple compliment.

“Just honest.” He flashed that grin again, making my heart pound just a little bit faster.

We drove further into the city, low-set buildings giving way to towering skyscrapers. Even though it was a Saturday, the traffic steadily built up the further we drove.

“Here we are,” Wyatt said a moment later, turning down a street before slowing into a parking spot in front of a black colored building. Glancing out the window, I couldn’t see any signs of where we were.

“Where are we?”

“Come with me,” Wyatt opened the door and got out of the car. I watched him stride around the front of the car before he opened my door, extending his hand. Grabbing my purse, I placed my hand in his, and stepped out of the car.

Keeping our hands interlocked he turned his palm to lace our fingers together. With a gentle squeeze, he led me along the sidewalk towards the black colored building in front of us.

“What is this place?”

“Wait and see,” Wyatt said as he stopped in front of a non-discrepant door.

“Found the perfect place to kill me, huh?” I joked, looking around for any clues as to where we were.

“Scared lil rebel?”

“Sticking with the nickname?” I asked, though I secretly loved it.

“I think it suits you,” he said as he opened the door and tugged me inside. Before us was a short hallway, dimly lit and barren. Honestly,

it felt a little ominous. Wyatt led me down the hallway, pausing before an archway that led into another room. As he looked down at me, I thought he looked almost nervous.

"I hope you like it," he said softly. With that, he stepped through the archway and the room came to life as overhead lights flickered. As I stepped into the room, I realized where we were.

"Is this…" I fell silent as I took in the artworks displayed on the walls.

Gallery 460.

"How did you..."

"Last night, you mentioned how much you wanted to go to an art gallery, so I figured it was the perfect place to take you on our date," he said, squeezing my hand.

"But how did you get us in? This is the most exclusive gallery in the city! They only do a few shows a year, and viewing is invitation only."

"One of the managers for the team, his wife owns the place. So, I made a few calls." He shrugged like it wasn't a big deal. Like this wasn't the most thoughtful thing anyone had ever done for me before. I'd only told him about this place last night and somehow, he'd got us in less than twelve hours later.

"I can't believe you got us in here…I don't even know what to say." While I was amazed to be there, I was just as amazed by Wyatt, as if my heart wasn't already threatening to burst.

"Well, you said you wanted to go. Now we have the entire gallery to ourselves."

"Thank you." I turned in a slow circle, trying to take everything in all at once. To say it felt surreal standing there was an understatement. Before now, I would have killed for the opportunity to view the gallery. The invitations are so coveted that only those with connections or money usually secured one.

I felt the sting of tears, so before I could start making a fool of myself, I tugged on his hand, leading him towards the first painting on our right. Wyatt had booked out the whole place for us, and I intended on enjoying each piece.

Wyatt was quiet as he let me take in the paintings. I had no idea whether he had an appreciation for art or not, yet he patiently followed me around the room, quietly letting me enjoy the moment.

Wyatt stopped before a painting, his head tilted to the side like an adorable golden retriever. I pressed my lips together to stop my amused smile as I gazed up at the painting alongside him. The artwork was open to interpretation. To one person, it could look like a field of

purple and blue flowers surrounded by willow trees with tufts of clouds in the sky. To someone else, it could look like a spiral of colors with no end in sight. Or it could look like nothing at all, just a blob of paint.

Gallery 460 was known for showcasing artists whose work required some level of thought and interpretation, a perfect mix of paintings and photography created to evoke something within the viewer.

"That's pretty…um…"

"Colorful?" I suggested.

"Yeah!" he said, attempting enthusiasm.

"I'm glad you are enjoying this," I teased, losing the battle with my grin. Wyatt gave me a wry look as we moved on to a gorgeous photograph of the night sky, brimming with endless stars and galaxies.

"You studied photography in Uni?" Wyatt asked softly.

"I did. I took a class my sophomore year and it was amazing. My professor really helped me realize that taking pictures was more than just a hobby."

"How did you get started at *Fusion Weekly?"* he asked, his hand still in mine as we continued slowly past each frame of artwork.

"I worked as a waitress at a pizzeria while I applied to any job that was even remotely related to my degree, when my soon-to-be boss, Lydia called me. She'd just started out, and the pay was terrible, but there was no way in hell I'd pass up the opportunity. It was the best decision I ever made. I get to meet new people, learn their stories, and then show it to anyone who reads the magazine." Realizing I was rambling, I stopped and gazed up at him with a sheepish smile.

"Sorry."

"Don't be. You love your job, and I like hearing about it." He squeezed my hand in his. "We can stay here as long as you want."

God, I want to kiss him.

I'd wanted to since the moment I'd opened my door, but now, with all the effort he'd put in, I couldn't hold back any longer.

I rose up onto my toes, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Thank you."

His surprised smile melted every bone in my body.

I sure could get used to that smile.

"THAT WAS INCREDIBLE," I gushed two hours later from the passenger seat of Wyatt's car. True to his word, we'd spent as much time at the gallery as I'd wanted. Wyatt patiently followed me around, listening to me rattle off random facts about the artwork and the gallery the entire

time.

"I'm glad you liked it."

"Like doesn't even cover it," I smiled.

"I'm glad to hear it. Now onto the next stop."

"Wait. There's more?"

"Of course."

While I'd hoped to spend more time with him, I hadn't expected him to plan out an entire day for us. The gallery itself already far exceeded my expectations for a first date.

As he pulled away from the Gallery, I reached out and grabbed his hand, placing it on my thigh, surprising the both of us. Though Wyatt kept his eyes on the road, his eyebrows raised, and I willed my thundering heart to calm. I've never been overly confident when it came to men, and I was certainly never so forward. If anything, I prided myself on self-control. Of course, that went out the window as Wyatt's hand shifted on my thigh and squeezed just a little, making me shift in my seat.

Josie now is not the time to be turned on.

Yet, there was no ignoring Wyatt's big hand, perfectly placed on my inner thigh. The fact I wore jeans did nothing to prevent me feeling every inch of his hand on me. Or from my mind from tumbling into the gutter. My imagination soared as I thought of his fingers inching upwards until he touched me through my jeans.

I wonder if he could feel how wet I am through denim.

My mind was so engrossed in my fantasy, that it took me a few moments to realize Wyatt had parked the car. Clearing my throat, I felt the heat rise into my cheeks again as I pulled myself back to reality, and my eyes widened as I realized where we were.

"Rick's!"

"I know we were here a few days ago."

"Don't care." My mouth was already watering thinking of Rick's food. I reached for the door, but Wyatt's hand tightened on my thigh, tugging my legs away from the door.

"Don't even think about it."

Before I could question what he meant, Wyatt turned the car off and got out. I stayed seated as he moved around to my door, opening it. Once again extended his hand, helping me out of the car. The butterflies in my stomach started up again.

Suddenly ravenous, I tugged Wyatt towards Rick's truck. It was perfect timing—there was no queue, and the moment we stepped up to the window Rick's head popped up.

"Hi there, little lady," he greeted with a smile. "Back again?"

"I think I've turned her into an addict." Wyatt moved behind me, his front pressing against my back as he placed his hand on my hip,

sending my heart fluttering. Rick's eyebrows rose slightly as his eyes lingered on Wyatt standing at my back.

"Well, you are always welcome Josie."

"What about me?" Wyatt joked.

Rick shrugged. "What can I say? She's prettier than you."

I laughed aloud while also blushing a little.

"The usual?" he asked.

"Yes please," I nodded.

"For both of us," Wyatt added dryly.

"Sounds good, kiddos. I'll bring it out to you." Rick waved us off as he turned to start on our order.

"I think you've replaced me as Rick's favorite customer."

"Well, you can't win everything," I joked, taking a seat at the same table we'd sat at on our first visit.

Our table.

"Has Rick ever mentioned expanding his business?" I asked, noting, like always, how many patrons sat around, treating themselves to Rick's amazing food.

"Not that I know of, but considering how busy he always is, I think he'd make a killing if he did." Wyatt said.

After my second visit to Rick's truck, I'd toyed with the idea of featuring him in *Fusion Weekly*. Rick's food truck was exactly the type of thing readers looked for when they bought a copy of the magazine. It might even prompt him to consider expanding, though I knew I'd need to ask Rick whether he was interested before running it by Lydia.

"I can see your mind ticking over there," Wyatt said as he smiled at me from across the table.

"Sorry," I smiled sheepishly. "I was thinking of interviewing Rick for the magazine and have all these ideas."

"Don't apologize, I like seeing how passionate you are about your job. Plus, that's not a bad idea, I'm sure he'd love to do it."

"You think so? I'd hate to put Rick on the spot by asking him."

"Ask me what?" Rick suddenly popped up beside us, our food in his hands.

Despite my enthusiasm, I suddenly felt a little shy to ask him.

The last thing I want is for Rick to think I'm taking advantage of him or his business.

"Josie wants to ask you something." Wyatt nodded at me with an encouraging look. Rick put our food on the table and patiently waited for me to say something.

I cleared my throat and shifted in my seat so I could face him. "I work for a magazine called *Fusion Weekly*. We highlight events, business and restaurants. I was wondering if you'd be interested in featuring in an issue. There'd be an interview, photos."

“Would you be the one interviewing me?” Rick asked as he crossed his arms over his burly chest.

“Absolutely. I’d take the photographs, too.”

Rick stroked his beard, looking off into the distance as though deep in thought.

After a moment, he nodded, a smile sweeping across his face.

“Sounds good to me.”

“Really?” I sat up straighter. “Here, I’ll give you my number and we can set up a time that works best for you.” Grabbing my purse, I pawed through it for a piece of paper before Rick placed his order pad and a pen in front of me. Giving him a grateful smile, I quickly wrote down my number.

“Perfect,” he said, still smiling as he gave me a little salute and walked back towards the small line of patrons forming outside his food truck.

“Look at you.”

I turned back to Wyatt with wide eyes as he grinned at me. He looked like was…proud. Just like that, I felt like I was on top of the world.

JOSIE

"Okay. I'm gonna give birth to a food baby," I groaned, holding my stomach. I'd eaten *way* too much, mostly due to Rick offering a complimentary dessert that I just couldn't say no too. No mere mortal could decline fried donuts rolled in cinnamon sugar. You just can't.

"Don't worry, I have something that will help with that," Wyatt said.

"A time machine that will take me back before I devoured those fried donuts?"

"Maybe not that good, but what I have in mind should help."

My eyes were drawn to Wyatt's hand as he used one to turn the wheel. His large hand easily turned the wheel as he turned onto the road. His other hand rested on the gear shift between us.

Who would have thought something so simple could be so damn hot?

"Enjoying the view?" Wyatt didn't take his eyes off the road, but I could see the corner of his mouth quirk up.

Clearly, I wasn't too sly with my staring. Why deny it at this point?

"Yes, I am." Deciding to make the most of it, I grabbed my phone and clicked the camera button. Angling it just right, I snapped a picture of him. While it was a simple shot, it highlighted exactly how attractive Wyatt was. His nose may be a little crooked from too many hockey mishaps, but it made him hotter in my opinion. So too, did the casual way he leaned back in his seat, wrist resting on the top of the steering wheel, the sleeves of his shirt pushed up past his elbows. My inner hand kink reared its head at the sight of the veins bulging in his hands and forearms.

I stared at the picture on my phone like a weirdo, and once again, my imagination soared. As I admired his strong jawline, I wondered how the light stubble would feel against my inner thighs. This picture was definitely going to become one of my favorites.

"Is it a good picture?" he asked, and I blushed profusely, as though he'd caught me red-handed.

"No wonder your face is on billboards," I mumbled, not daring to look up.

"Good genes, I guess."

“Does that mean your brothers are also attractive?” His head snapped in my direction so fast that I couldn’t help but giggle. “Are they single too?” I innocently asked.

His eyes narrowed, and he shot out his hand and grabbed my knee, squeezing, just like he did last night. It made me jump, and I reached out, gripping his wrist. Wyatt waited a moment before doing it again, making me half-gasp, half-laugh.

“Wanna say that again?” he asked, and as he moved to squeeze my knee again, I jerked on instinct before erupting in a fit of giggles.

“I’m kidding!”

“You little siren.” He released my knee, only to move his hand along my thigh, leaving it there. “I’ll remember that later.”

There was a daring promise in his voice that made me want to shift in my seat, and it took all my willpower to keep still. A barrage of dirty thoughts flooded my mind, making my skin heat up.

The possessive way Wyatt gripped my thigh had me wondering if he was the dominating type. Then there was the intense look in his eyes when he kissed me last night.

“I hope you like this next surprise,” Wyatt said, interrupting my thoughts. I doubt I could hate anything Wyatt does.

Less than a minute later, he steered us into the Toronto Knights Arena.

I gazed up at it through the front windshield, marveling at how much bigger it looked in the daytime, without tons of fans waiting to get inside. The parking lot was empty as Wyatt drove through the security gate and around to the back entrance.

“I saw how much you enjoyed the game last night, so I thought, why not let you see it all up close?”

“Wait, seriously?”

“Yep.” He flashed me a grin before jumping out of the car. With excitement building, I grabbed my phone out of my bag which I placed at my feet, not needing it. I opened my door and stepped out, finding Wyatt standing there frowning.

I think I found one of his love languages. *Acts of service.*

He scowled at the door like it did him dirty as I shut it behind me, trying not to laugh.

“You can glare at it later; I have a hockey arena to explore.” I grabbed his wrist and tugged him towards the entrance door.

“I wasn’t glaring at it,” he protested behind me.

“Yeah, you were. Do you have a thing against car doors?” I called back.

“My mom taught me to never let a woman open any door.” Proving his point, he took out what looked like a key card from his pocket and held it to the door scanner. As soon as the lock on the door

clicked, Wyatt grabbed the handle.

"After you m'lady," he said dramatically, as he bowed and waved his hand in front of him.

I slid past him into the semi-familiar hallway from last night. With a hand on my lower back Wyatt led us down the hall.

"First stop is the locker room for skates."

Our steps echoed along the concrete hallway, and I was grateful that Wyatt knew his way around. After the second turn, I lost all sense of direction. When we reached the locker room door, Wyatt held it open, and I ducked under his arm to get through.

My first thought was how huge the room was. Not that I should have been surprised, considering it needed to be big enough for the players and their gear, not to mention the coaching staff and the rest. I felt a little like I was trespassing as I walked through the room, taking everything in. It was clear they spared no expense when it came to building the room.

It was rectangular in shape, with a massive carpet displaying the Knights logo in the center of the room. The player's lockers or cubbies lined both sides, benches right in front. The lockers were made of a gorgeous dark oak, providing each player with adequate space to change into their uniforms. At the far back of the room, I could see what appeared to be two large offices that I assumed were for the coaches.

Whoever looked after the locker room did a great job—there was no way a team of men were so neat and tidy. All the uniforms were clean and neatly hung in their rightful place, the pucks in a container, and the player's hockey sticks lined the wall in a rack. I was surprised it smelled nice, too. I'd expected an overwhelming smell of body odor and dampness, so I was pleasantly surprised at how nice and fresh the place smelled.

Yep. Whoever looks after this place deserves a pay rise.

Wyatt lingered near the door as I took it all in. I felt his eyes on me, following me around the room. As I caught sight of his jersey number above a cubby, I moved closer, running my fingers across the back of his jersey. For the first time it dawned on me that I stood in the locker room of a professional hockey team.

This doesn't happen to normal people.

Feeling a little overwhelmed, I needed to break the silence, and I turned around to face Wyatt. "So, what really goes on in here? Do you guys sit around and braid each other's hair?"

"And talk about boys," Wyatt said in a high-pitched voice.

"I think you've done that voice a few times," I teased.

"That's my real voice. Didn't you know?"

"It suits you."

“I think so too,” Wyatt said, his voice dropping back to normal as he walked towards me. I felt my breath catch in my throat as he stopped so close we were almost touching. Then, with a cheeky grin, he reached behind me and grabbed a pair of white ice skates and handed them to me. “Here you go.”

I stared at the pretty skates, unable to wipe the smile off my face, excited—and intimidated by the thought of hitting the ice with Wyatt. Little did he know, I had no idea how to skate.

“I had Bryton drop off Mila’s skates for you to use. They may be a bit small but it’s better to have a snug skate than a loose one,” he said, as he moved around the room, collecting two hockey sticks and a handful of pucks. I held my skates by their laces, my nerves growing as I watched Wyatt collect his own skates from his cubby.

“Ready?” he asked, and from the mischievous grin on his face, I could tell he found my nerves amusing.

I must look like a total fish out of water standing here.

With a jerk of his head, the two of us made our way out of the locker room and back down the hallway, skates in hand. When we turned a corner, I was surprised to find that carpet replaced the concrete floor.

“It's easier for our skates to grip the carpet,” Wyatt explained. “You’d be surprised how often we eat shit on the concrete.”

Just picturing huge hockey players hobbling in their skates and falling made me laugh under my breath. “Are you sure we’re okay to be here?” I asked after a moment. The last thing I wanted was to get Wyatt in trouble.

“Afraid of getting caught lil rebel?”

“Nope.”

It was like he had some kind of innate knowledge that calling me that was enough to get my competitive side going. In the past, while Tasha was the one who came up with the crazy ideas, all it took was a little goading to get me to go along with— I couldn’t stand to lose.

Now was no different.

To prove my eagerness, I tried to push open the huge set of double doors that lead to the rink with my shoulder. Tried being the operative word. The doors must have weighed a ton, and with my hands full, seemingly impossible to open.

Chuckling, Wyatt reached over my head and pushed, the door swinging open with ease. I glared at the door for betraying me. In an attempt to maintain my dignity, I squared my shoulders and stepped through the doors.

Only to stop in my tracks.

The ice rink stretched out before me, the bright, white, ice glistening beneath the stadium lights. It looked freshly Zamboni-d.

With wide eyes I stepped forward, ignoring the chill in the air. The entire arena was empty and appeared so much larger with row upon row of empty seats.

I wonder if I shouted something, if it would echo through the whole place?

Wyatt gently nudged me, motioning towards the player's bench. "Watch your step," he murmured softly.

Stepping into the players box, I was struck by its size. From the stands—and the television—it appeared small, but the reality was it could easily fit ten of me standing shoulder to shoulder.

"Wow," I breathed.

I can't believe I'm only a few feet from the ice.

I appreciated Wyatt giving me the chance to take it all in.

"Do you ever get nervous stepping onto the ice?" I asked.

"At first, I did. Having thousands of eyes on you, all those voices screaming your name, it can be nerve-wrecking."

I glanced over at him as he spoke. He was looking out over the ice, his face animated as though he pictured the crowd in his mind. It revealed to me just how much he loved what he did.

"It was more intimidating when I first joined the league, but now I love it. There's no feeling like skating out onto the ice and hearing the fans. The adrenaline rush that comes with it."

"You look at home on the ice." And he did. From the moment we entered the arena I saw an ease in his step—the comfort and confidence that came when someone was in sync with their passion.

"It's become my second home," he said earnestly, and it made me want to hear him talk about it further. I sat on the bench, placing the skates by my feet, and looked up at Wyatt as he leaned his hip against the side of the wall.

"Whenever I needed to clear my head or get away from things, it was always the ice I turned to," he continued. "Whether it was the local indoor rink a few blocks from home, or a frozen pond a friend had. I was always there," he chuckled at the memory.

"I know what you mean." And I truthfully did. "Sometimes you just need an escape." Wyatt looked at me curiously, as though waiting for me to elaborate.

"I found the same thing with running," I explained. "When things got rough, a run was all I needed. So long as I had my headphones, I could run forever and just leave everything else behind me."

Wyatt nodded slowly. "What got you into running?"

I was quiet for a moment, trying to think how best to answer when the reason was a story I hated to tell and a topic I typically avoided.

But this is Wyatt. I feel like I can tell him anything.

"I'd just turned fifteen when I learned my dad had colon cancer," I

swallowed thickly as a lump formed in my throat. “The whole drive home I just felt numb, like my mind couldn’t process the news. The moment we got home, I just ran.”

My heart seized painfully at the memory.

“After months of my father being unable to keep any food down, getting thinner, and so fatigued he could barely get out of bed, I pleaded with him to the doctor. I knew something was wrong. It was just the two of us; my mother left us when I was six, and the last thing I wanted was to lose my dad too.” I paused, taking a shaky breath.

“When we got a call from his doctor asking for us to come in for the results, I knew it was bad news. I knew it in my soul, yet when he broke the news of my dad’s diagnosis, my heart sank. It was like being doused with cold water. From that moment, running became my safety net.”

“Josie, I’m so sorry,” Wyatt said, sitting beside me on the bench and taking my hand in both of his. “That had to be rough, especially as a kid.”

“Yeah,” I said softly, playing with the hem of my sweater with my free hand. I was terrified that if I looked at him and saw sympathy in his eyes that I would burst into tears.

Definitely not first date vibes, Josie.

“Is he doing better now?” Wyatt asked, his question opening a hole in my heart, one that hasn’t healed. I wrapped my free hand around my thigh, nails digging into my skin through my jeans as I shook my head.

No. He passed away a year ago. After so many years of fighting, he couldn’t anymore. Deep down, I knew his prognosis was bad, even when he lied and said he was recovering. He fought for ten years but it got to be too much.”

“Oh, Josie,” Wyatt said, stroking my hand gently with his thumb as he squeezed my hand. The ache in my chest expanded, the pressure behind my eyes building. It was hard thinking of my dad. For most of my life, he was the only person I had. The one person who was there through everything and who’d had my back no matter what.

My mind drifted back to the time I came home from elementary school in tears because some girl laughed at my hair. The lopsided pigtails my father spent forever on. Or in high school, when the guy I liked asked someone else to prom, so my dad took me out to get ice cream and listened to me vent about how much of an asshole the guy was. Even the awkward conversations like when I got my period or had my first kiss. My dad was there for it all.

Yet, while I never wanted to lose my dad, I hated seeing him in so much pain. I loathed the cancer that ate away at him until he was a shell of who he used to be. I wanted him to be pain free, even if that

meant not being here with me.

"I am so sorry." Wyatt's voice was so soft as he continued brushing his thumb against my knuckles. "I bet he was a great man."

Finally, I lifted my head to meet his gaze. He graced me with the kindest smile, and there was no stopping the hot tears as they streamed down my face.

"He was. He taught me everything I know about hockey."

"Oh really?" Wyatt raised a hand and wiped away my tears.

"Every time there was a game on, we watched it together. We'd sit on the couch with snacks and drinks. If one of us were busy, the other would tape it so we could watch it together later."

"That sounds like a blast." His smile widened. "What was his favorite team?"

Normally when someone asks me about my dad I shut down—talking about him was still too painful. So, it surprised me when I found myself answering his questions.

"He went back and forth. He liked the Calgary Flames," At that, he scoffed. "And of course the Knights." Which wasn't a lie, my dad grew up watching the Toronto Knights. "He would freak out if he knew I'd met you. Neither of us would have a say in the matter–he would have demanded I bring you home so he could do the whole 'mean dad thing' but then he'd ask you a million questions about hockey."

"Well, he was clearly a man of great taste," Wyatt joked, his smile wavering slightly, as though he was unsure of himself. I found myself smiling, appreciating his attempt at lightening the mood. As sad as it made me, talking about dad, on the flip side, it also felt good to share my memories of him with another person. Someone other than Tasha and Lydia.

"Wait, does that mean you've seen me play before? Are you secretly a stalker?" Wyatt asked with wide eyes.

"Yep, totally. I know where you do yoga and everything," I deadpanned.

"I knew I felt eyes on my ass the whole class." He played along, making me laugh, the sound scratchy.

We fell into silence, but it wasn't uncomfortable. His fingers soothed me as he wiped at the last of my tears and drew his fingers through mine.

"Thank you for telling me about him," Wyatt said softly. "I would have loved the chance to meet him."

I leaned my cheek into the palm of his hand meeting his eyes.

"Dad would have really liked you."

JOSIE

"Ready to get on the ice?"

I glanced at the pair of skates sitting by my feet, my body already feeling the bruises I was about to sustain from falling on the ice. For the first time in my life, I wished for a little more padding on my butt.

Thankfully, Wyatt provided a wanted distraction as he slid on his own skates. His fingers moved with such efficiency, lacing up his skate, making quick work of tightening the laces from the bottom, all the way to the top before securing them in a knot.

Damn he's good with his hands.

In a matter of minutes, he was all laced up and ready to go. He stood up and glanced over at me and then my skates which remained untouched.

"So, I have a confession," I gave him a sheepish look. "I, uh…I don't really know how to skate."

"You live in a place that basically invented hockey and you don't know how to skate?" His eyes widened as a smile tugged at his lips. I shook my head. It was practically a crime in Toronto to not know how to skate. During the cold winter months, every kid was out on the frozen lakes or the ice rinks, skating. In high school, ice-skating was the most popular kind of date.

"It's okay, you're not entirely hopeless," Wyatt said, his grin breaking free.

"Excuse me. Hopeless?"

"I added 'not entirely' on there," he said, as if it made it any better. "Don't worry, we should be able to at least get you to a six-year-old level."

"You do know this is a date, right? You're supposed to woo the girl, not make fun of her." I raised an eyebrow at him.

"This is a date?" Wyatt said, his mouth gaping dramatically. "I thought we were just two bros hanging out."

"Did you just 'bro' me?" Now it was my mouth that fell open.

Wyatt chuckled as he lowered into a squat in front of me. My eyes widened a fraction at the sight. His shoulders looked even broader from this angle. The urge to grab him and pull him to me grew with each passing second. He grabbed my ankle and gently pulled off my

shoe, placing it on the ground beside him. My lungs stopped working as he kept my foot on his lap while grabbing my skate. His finger tapped against the inside of my ankle, prompting me to lift my foot up so he could slide it inside the skate.

I was literally frozen to the bench, watching as his fingers laced up my skate with precision. I felt like my brain was malfunctioning—all coherent thoughts were gone. I'd never thought that seeing a man like Wyatt on his knees before me would turn me on so much.

He tapped my other ankle, skate in hand, ready to put on. In a blink of an eye, he had both skates laced up.

"How do those feel?" He asked, peering up at me. I wiggled my toes in the skates, pleased to find they fit perfectly.

"They feel good."

"There," he said, lowering my feet gently to the floor. "We'll have you skating like a pro in no time." The way he tilted his head up to look at me had my stomach erupting in butterflies.

"I'm going to fall on my ass a lot, aren't I?"

"Absolutely," he said. "But I've got you. I'll even promise to try not to laugh."

"Wow, that's so kind of you," I said dryly.

Wyatt laughed aloud, and in one smooth motion, he stood up, bringing his crotch directly in line with my face.

Do not stare, Josie. He is not a piece of meat.

Before I could do something stupid, I quickly stood up, only to lose my balance as I felt myself tilt to the side. A muscled arm wrapped around my waist, keeping me upright.

Balancing on thin metal blades is going to be a lot harder than I thought.

"Don't worry I got you," Wyatt said from above me. "Just remember heel to toe when you walk."

Easier said than done.

With his arm wrapped around my waist, we slowly, and awkwardly on my part, walked towards the gate that led onto the ice.

"Why do you guys jump over the boards instead of going through the gate?" I randomly asked.

"Makes us look cooler."

"Definitely makes you more of a badass."

"Obviously. Although I've fallen once or twice," Wyatt admitted from behind me.

"Seriously?" I glanced at him over my shoulder.

"Oh yeah. If your skate gets stuck on the other side, you just go flying over and eat shit."

"Won't lie to you, that makes me feel a little bit better."

"You like the image of me falling on the ice?" He raised an

eyebrow at me.

“If star player Wyatt Boone can eat shit, then it’s less embarrassing when I do.”

Wyatt chuckled again, sending a shiver along my spine. “Want me to fall a few times to make you feel better?”

“It would help,” I joked.

“Come on lil rebel, you’re stalling. Let’s get you onto the ice.”

I stared at the ice spread out before me, my apprehension increasing.

I’m really not looking forward to falling on my ass a hundred times in front of Wyatt.

“Don’t worry, I got you, remember?” Wyatt moved around me, stepping onto the ice and turning so he faced me. “You got this.”

“You make it look so easy and natural,” I grumbled.

He extended his hands out, ready for me to step onto the ice for the first time. I eyed his hands, biting my lip.

“Promise to hold onto me?”

“Promise.”

“THIS IS the stupidest sport ever. There I said it. It’s stupid and useless and horrible,” I huffed after falling on my ass yet again. The cold ice seeped through my jeans, and I’d started to think my butt would be permanently frozen.

Off to the side, Wyatt chuckled. “You almost had it.”

“You’re such a liar,” I said, knowing I was nowhere close. Every time I went to put one foot in front of the other, I wobbled and fell. I did manage to skate a few steps, but that’s the most I’d managed. “I don't care. I’m staying right here and I’m not moving.” I laid back on the ice, not caring about the cold. Both my ego and butt bruised.

The sound of blades on ice drew closer before Wyatt’s face appeared over mine.

“You’re just going to lay on the ice for the rest of the day?” he questioned.

“Yep, because *someone* keeps letting me fall and won’t stop laughing at me.” I sent him a pointed look.

“You said you didn't want my help.”

“Lies.” I waved him off, denying that I did, in fact, say that. Initially when I stepped onto the ice and didn’t immediately fall, my confidence grew. I let myself think that perhaps it wasn’t so hard, after all. So, when Wyatt tried to teach me, I told him to take a few

steps back and let me do my thing.

I clearly overestimated my abilities.

“Just help me up, you big loaf.” I didn’t have to look at him to know he was smirking as I raised my arms and waited. I knew if I tried getting up myself, I’d be back where I started.

Skating around to my feet, Wyatt grabbed my hands and pulled me upwards. My feet scrambled to find purchase on the ice, and I gripped Wyatt’s hands so tightly my knuckles turned white.

“Find your balance,” he quietly said, letting me hold onto him. Once I finally found my balance I exhaled deeply.

“Wanna try it my way now?” Wyatt asked, his eyebrow raised in amusement.

Forced to realize I couldn’t do things my way, my pride had taken a hit. My inner perfectionist was not happy.

Just face it. If I don’t want to fall every two seconds, I need to learn from Wyatt.

“Fine,” I conceded, shifting my hands to his forearms, once again noting the muscles tensing beneath my fingers. I could tell Wyatt was biting his cheek to stop from laughing at me.

“Let's start from the feet up.” He shifted his stance and skated back just a little. “Keep your skates pointed forward. Whatever direction your skates are in is where you will go.”

Looking at my feet, I followed his directions, keeping the front of my skates pointed towards him.

“Bend your knees a little. You never want to keep your legs locked.”

When I did as he instructed, Wyatt let out a little hum. “Good job.”

The compliment may have made me feel like a little kid being told ‘good job’ from their teacher, but my heart still soared at it.

“Now just hold onto me,” Wyatt said before skating backwards. My grip on his forearms tightened as he slowly pulled me along after him. I looked away from my skates long enough to stare at him with wide eyes.

“I got you,” he smiled. The way he said it felt bigger than just this moment. It felt like a promise.

Wyatt slowly skated backwards, pulling me along with him, and to me, it felt like we were flying. The only sound was that of our blades cutting through the ice. I glanced back down at my feet, only for Wyatt to squeeze my elbows.

“Eyes on me.” His voice was soft but firm. “Don’t look at your feet, trust them to know what to do.”

I did as he said as Wyatt moved us around the ice at a snail's pace. We made it a lap around the rink before I started to feel a bit more comfortable.

“There you go,” he murmured.

The little encouragement made my stomach flutter.

“Try pushing off the ice a little.” He kept us at a slow speed letting his skate’s glide.

Taking a steadying breath, I pushed my foot down and back against the ice. It wasn’t much of a push but I moved forward an inch or two on my own. I did it again, a little bit harder, moving across the ice better than before. My head snapped up and looked at Wyatt with a wide grin.

“You’re doing great.”

Feeling empowered, I loosened my death grip on his arms and lifted my foot a centimeter off the ice to try and glide forward. Excitement grew when I didn’t wobble or fall on my ass.

“Okay, you ready?” At his words I paused.

“Ready for what?” I felt his hands slowly release my elbows, which only made me re-grip his forearms. “No.” I shook my head, knowing what he was about to do.

Like taking training wheels off a bike. I’m not ready.

“Babe, you’ve got this.” He gave me an encouraging smile, prying his forearms from my grip. “Just skate towards me.” Wyatt put more distance between us.

He makes it sound so easy.

Despite my nerves, the need to prove myself swelled within me as I eyed the distance between us. It was the same feeling I got when I used to run competitively. The desire to prove to myself that I can do something, even if it’s hard.

So, with shaky legs, I slowly pushed off the ice. I braced myself, ready to fall, but surprisingly, my skates glided across the ice. Albeit, not as smoothly as Wyatt, but better than before. Holding my arms out for balance, I ever so slowly pushed myself across the ice. Every time I got close to Wyatt, he skated a bit further away, hovering like a mother hen in case I fell.

“Look at me!” I yelled, unable to help myself.

“Already a pro.”

Wyatt stayed by me as I kept on skating, going a little bit faster each time. I was still a bit shaky, and my arms flailed whenever my balance took a wobble. But with each push off the ice, I felt increasingly confident.

Deciding I was ready for more, I made the idiot decision to try a little spin. I knew it was a bad idea as soon as I made the motion to turn. I heard Wyatt call my name as I twisted, my skates hooking together. I knew I was going to fall hard as my arms flung out and the ice rushed up to meet me. As I braced myself, eyes closed, when a large body flew into mine. I felt Wyatt’s arms wrap around my middle,

holding me roughly, as the two of us slid across the ice.

We came to stop a second later with me cradled in Wyatt's arms, my own around his neck. I opened my eyes to find him staring down at me in concern.

"Are you okay?" His eyes roamed my body the best they could with the position we were in. Wyatt's face centimeters away from mine.

"I'm okay," I answered breathlessly. Glancing down, I noticed Wyatt was on his knees.

Like he ran and slid on his knees to catch me in time.

I wanted to swoon at the action, but I quickly remembered his knee injury.

"Your knee!" I wriggled out of his grasp, falling back onto the ice. I didn't register the bite of the ice as I moved onto my knees, taking my turn to look him over. "Are you okay?"

If I'm the cause of Wyatt re-injuring himself, I will never forgive myself.

"What were you thinking? You could have gotten hurt." My hands fluttered around his knees as if I could help. He seemed okay, but what did I know?

"Me? You were going to fall and hurt yourself," Wyatt shot back. His tone wasn't angry, more like he was taken back that I was worried about him and not myself.

"So? I'm not the one with a hockey career to think about," I scolded. "I'm disposable."

My ex used to tell me that all the time, and in this moment he was right. Out of the two of us, I was the one who could stand to get hurt and not have my life ruined. Not Wyatt.

"Josie." It wasn't my name that made me pause, it was the way he said it. Wyatt shifted on his knees and brought his hand up to my chin holding it firmly, bringing my gaze to his. "You are *not* disposable." Those gorgeous blue eyes pierced straight into mine. "You will *never* be disposable. Not to me"

When I tried to look away from his intense stare, he just held my chin tighter.

"I know we haven't known each other long and you don't believe me yet, but you will."

The promise in his voice pierced me through the heart like an arrow. I don't think I'd ever heard a man say something with so much conviction. Like he'd make it his mission to prove me wrong.

At this moment, I wanted nothing more than to kiss him, needing to feel that this thing between us wasn't just in my head. With this hand still holding my chin I leaned forward, my hands resting on the tops of his thighs.

Wyatt remained perfectly still until I was leaning over him, and my lips were inches from his. Then whatever control he had, broke as he caught my lips with his.

I'm not sure I would ever get used to kissing Wyatt. It was like his lips were meant for mine. The way he went from soft to hard and back to soft with each pass. I could feel myself forming an addiction.

I barely felt the cold of the ice as our lips fought each other. His tongue slipped past mine briefly before he pulled back to nibble my lip.

"Do you know how much self-control I've had today, not to kiss you?" he asked against my lips.

"What was stopping you?"

"I was trying to be a gentleman." He brought his thumb up, swiping it across my lip with enough pressure to drag it with the movement. I watched his eyes darkened as they followed his thumb. He was probably smudging my lipstick, but not a single part of me cared. Not when he looked at me like that.

"Don't be." The voice that left me wasn't one I heard before. I sounded…sultry.

"Be careful what you say lil rebel." With his thumb still on my bottom lip he pulled it downwards. "I may be a gentleman right now, but there's only so much control a man has."

JOSIE

I would have felt perfectly content staying there on the ice with Wyatt. But the cold soaked through our pants, forcing the two of us to get up. Of course, Wyatt had to show off, getting to his feet in one smooth motion, while I flailed around until he grabbed my hands and yanked me up.

Once he knew I was steady on my feet, he skated over to the bench, collecting the hockey sticks and the pucks. I kept my eyes on him, watching for any sign that he'd hurt his knee. When I saw none, I let myself relax a little. Although watching him skate away did little to ease the ache between my legs.

"Be careful lil rebel."

The words echoed through my head, making me want to do the exact opposite. I wanted to end the date here, go back to my place, and see just how ungentlemanly Wyatt could be.

"Want to try hitting some pucks?" He called over his shoulder.

"You sure you trust me with a hockey stick?" I called back.

"Not planning on hitting me with it are you?"

"With the stick, no," I laughed. "But I can't guarantee I won't hit you with the pucks."

"I'll make sure to stay behind you then," Wyatt joked. He skated back to my side, holding both sticks as he tossed the pucks onto the ice with a thud.

I eyed the hockey stick in his hand, realizing just how big they were. Somehow, I didn't think they were meant for a 5'5 person. When he extended the stick towards me, I awkwardly held it. Laying his own on the ice, Wyatt skated up behind me.

"You want to put your hands here and here." He grabbed my right hand and moved it down low on the stick. His fingers curled over mine, having me grip it tightly. "All your power is in your right hand. Gripping it here also gives you the most control," Wyatt explained, chest pressed against my back as he leaned into me, his cheek softly grazing mine. "Your left hand goes here," he instructed, moving my hand towards the top of the stick. "Choking up on the stick keeps it from slipping."

I tried to listen intently; I really did. But the odds were stacked

against me. The way Wyatt pressed his body against mine, the way he spoke quietly in my ear, the way he said 'choking'. It was only natural that my mind would wander.

I really should be ashamed by how many dirty thoughts I'd had about Wyatt today alone.

I was like putty in his hands as he shifted my hands. I vaguely heard him say something about shifting my weight when I brought the stick back, but honestly, it went in one ear and out the other.

"Ready to try it with a puck?"

"Uh, yeah." It didn't come out as confident as I'd intended. It was hard to pay attention when all I could think about was whether Wyatt planned to grip my body the way he did the hockey stick.

"Remember to hit the puck in the middle so it goes further." Wyatt moved a puck in front of me before skating off to the side. I kept my gaze downwards so he couldn't see that I hadn't heard a word he'd said.

Fake it 'til you make it. Can't be that hard. You can do it Josie.

Taking a deep breath, I lowered my hockey stick to the ice. Trying to ignore Wyatt's gaze, I drew back the stick before swinging it forward, almost like swinging a golf club. The stick hit the puck, sending it hurtling down the ice. It went further than I thought it would, and when it came to a stop, I threw my hands up.

"Hell yeah!" I looked at Wyatt, feeling like I'd won the lottery. "Did you see that?"

"You're a natural," Wyatt grinned back. "Now do it again."

I hit puck after puck, each one going a little bit further than the last. Wyatt's encouraging smile made my insides turn to goo. Once I hit all the pucks, I stood there grinning, feeling extremely proud of myself.

"I think I could make the team."

"Oh yeah?" Wyatt skated around me, casually controlling a puck with his stick like he wasn't even aware he was doing it.

"I bet once Coach Barnum sees my skills, he'd put me in." I pushed off the ice, skating towards him.

"I bet he would. What position would you play?"

"Obviously Center."

"Coming for my job, huh?"

"Of course. I'll be the new Wyatt Boone." I skated around him, wobbling only a little.

"I think you're a little too short to be me, though."

"Not all of us can be giants," I grinned.

"Hmm." Wyatt skated towards me, a strange look on his face. As he drew nearer, I skated back a little, dropping the hockey stick on the ice. Wyatt's expression made my skin break out in goosebumps as his

gaze swept over me, as though he was devouring me with his eyes.

"What's the look for?"

He didn't answer me. The back of my skate got tangled with my other skate, but I didn't need to worry as Wyatt reached out and grabbed me by my waist. As he lifted me into the air, I squealed—it wasn't lost on me that he easily lifted me in the air like I weighed nothing. He carried me across the ice until I felt the board against the back of my legs, and my breath caught in my throat.

"That's better," he murmured, as he sat me on the edge of the boards. His hands gently spread my legs open as he positioned himself between them, now almost eye level.

"Now you can see what it's like at my height," he said, but all I could do was stare at him. I felt cocooned by him, by his strong body, and by the smell of his cologne that invaded my senses.

Tentatively, I lifted my hands and pressed them against his chest. I could feel his heart pounding beneath my hands, the pace matching my own. I'd never felt my heart race the way it did when I'm near Wyatt.

If I felt cold before, I didn't now. Wyatt's hands on my thighs burned through my jeans making me wish I was wearing a skirt instead.

"You looked really good out there on the ice." Wyatt's voice was soft as his thumbs stroked my thighs.

"I had a good teacher."

"Clearly, I did a good job," he murmured.

"And so humble," I giggled.

"I think a kiss would humble me," he said, jokingly, but the way he looked at me was anything but.

"Hm…I'm not sure one kiss would work though." I played along with his game, hands moving up a little higher on his chest.

"Guess I'll need multiple kisses just to be sure." His voice took on a serious tone as his eyes sparkled.

"To be safe," I nodded along. Leaning forward, I angled my head up just a few inches. Wyatt barely had to dip his head as our lips met. Just as I was about to sink into the kiss a voice shouted from the other side of the rink.

"And what are you doing on my ice?"

The two of us jerked apart, and I fell against Wyatt's chest before quickly righting myself. My cheeks flamed at the fact we were caught kissing against the boards. I buried my face in Wyatt's chest as I tried to stifle a laugh. My ability to laugh at the most in-opportune times was legendary.

"Sorry about that Coach." Wyatt called out, drawing me against his chest. A new wave of embarrassment washed over me, wiping the

smile from my face. We weren't just caught by some random staff person. Of course it had to be the Toronto Knights coach. I pulled back to look up at Wyatt's face.

"Don't worry he isn't as bad as he seems," he said softly. I knew he was saying that for my sake, but we both knew Coach Barnum was a hard ass. I could feel his eyes on us, waiting. Knowing we had to face him, Wyatt helped me off the boards and back onto the ice. With his back to his coach, he gently rubbed the smeared lipstick from beneath my lower lip, which only added fuel to the fire burning inside me

"Perfect," he murmured. Dropping his hand from my face, he laced our fingers together. With a reassuring smile, he gently tugged me across the ice. As we neared Coach Barnum, my nerves skyrocketed. Aside from being one of the best coaches in the league, he was also an incredible player back in the day.

We came to a stop on the other side of the boards as Coach Barnum stood there with his arms crossed. His brown hair and beard were peppered with a little bit of gray that enhanced his attractiveness. Coach may be in his late 50's, but the guy still had it. I wasn't the only one who thought so either. There was a whole Instagram page dedicated to *'one of the hottest hockey coaches'*.

"Coach, this is Josie Scott. Josie, this Coach Steven Barnum," Wyatt introduced us.

"Nice to meet you." I held out my free hand. "I'm a huge fan."

Nice one, Josie. You sound like an idiot.

"Oh really?" His hand was firm in mine as we shook hands.

"Yeah. My dad used to talk about your winning goal for the Cup Championship. How you brought the team back from a 3-1 deficit."

Great, and now you sound like a crazed fan.

"That was a great game," he replied as he looked from me to Wyatt and back again. People weren't exaggerating when they said Coach Barnum was intimidating as hell. The way he looked at us made me feel like a naughty teenager.

"I wanted to show Josie the arena," Wyatt started to explain. I didn't miss the way he squeezed my hand like he was nervous.

"I practically begged him to bring me here," I quickly added. If his coach was mad at us, then the least I could do was take some of the heat. "Great game yesterday."

Coach's eyebrows raised just a fraction, looking at Wyatt briefly before he turned his attention back to me.

"Starting to find our rhythm again," he said.

"If you moved Crosby to Right Defensemen instead of Left, you'd have a stronger line." The words flew from my lips before I could stop them. I stood there wide eyed, shocked that I dared to advise the head coach of the Knights.

“A stronger line?” he asked.

“Oh…Um…I...” I stuttered.

Josie, what the hell did you just do?

I looked at Wyatt for help, but Coach spoke again.

“Crosby has always played Left.”

I thought he’d be pissed off, but I was surprised to find him looking at me curiously. I was unsure if I should say more—I knew nothing about coaching. Wyatt squeezed my hand, and as I glanced up at him, he gave me an encouraging nod.

“Well…” I hesitated for a second before pushing on. “Crosby may play left, but he pushes with his right foot more. He also uses his right shoulder when he hits. If you move him to right defense, he’d get more power in his push off.”

“He does,” Wyatt spoke up, sounding shocked. I hardly noticed—my attention was on Coach Barnum, as he stood there, saying nothing.

Nice work, Josie. You’ve gone too far.

“Just a suggestion,” I added, my voice soft as the confidence I’d had seconds ago depleted.

“Thank you for the suggestion,” he finally answered, not sounding in the least bit upset. “I’ll let you two get back to it.” With that, he gave the two of us a nod before turning on his heel and walking away. I waited until he disappeared before I allowed myself to look at Wyatt.

“I just pissed him off, didn’t I?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Wyatt shook his head, but I wasn’t sure he was convinced.

Great.

“It was a great suggestion though. I’d never thought to do that.” He looked lost in thought for a moment as we skated back across the ice. “Any other hockey wisdom you wanna share?”

“You’ll have to put me on the payroll,” I teased, making Wyatt laugh.

“Where the hell have you been all these years?” He pulled us to a stop, staring down at me with a soft smile.

“Living below you, I guess.”

“Well, I for one am glad we got stuck in that elevator together.” He cradled my face with his hands. Gazing up at him, I felt my heart race.

“I am too.”

WYATT

"Coach caught you guys?"

"At least you didn't have your pants around your ankles," Trevor said, Bryton and I stared at him. "What? That would've been really awkward."

"Wasn't like we were fucking against the boards," I grumbled. That would've been a hundred times more embarrassing.

"Coach sure would be a mood killer," Bryton said.

I shook my head. "I won't lie. When I heard Coach's voice my balls almost shriveled up."

"Small miracles. There are cameras everywhere in the arena," Trevor said.

"Do we want to know how you know that?" Bryton asked. Trevor only smirked. "Anyways," Bryton changed the subject. "Think Coach is going to ride your ass today?"

I extended my left leg out, bending at the waist as I stretched. It crossed my mind after Coach caught Josie and I on the weekend. It was hard to tell if he was mad at us being on the ice or not.

"It's Coach, you never know." I switched legs, pleasantly surprised that it only slightly ached. After sliding on the ice to catch Josie, I knew my knee would hurt. Then, when I dropped Josie back at her apartment, she surprised me with a jar of pepper paste—the same pepper paste she swore helped her own knee injury.

Admittedly, I didn't expect much when I applied it. All it did was make my skin tingle and then I washed it off. Yet, this morning I woke up feeling pretty good, devoid of the usual stiffness I had in my knee first thing.

Maybe Josie's onto something.

"Guess we're about to find out," Trevor said, pulling me from my thoughts as he nodded towards the other side of the ice. I lifted my head to see Coach approaching, arms crossed, his expression as intimidating as always. He didn't need to say a word—his presence alone was enough to ensure he had everyone's attention. Instantly, the team lined up before him.

"We played well Friday. Finally looking like a real team out there." Coach's eyes looked down the line at everyone. "Smart plays." This

time he looked directly at me, and I straightened under his gaze.

"We still have a long way to go in this season. Yes, we have a few losses under our belt, but we're not out. If we continue to play like we did Friday, we have a shot at the title again."

There were a few grunts of agreement.

"We're switching up practice today," Coach instructed, as he again looked at me, before his gaze moved to one of my teammates. "Crosby, you are switching to right defenseman."

"Oh, shit." I muttered to myself as the team exchanged confused glances.

"But Coach, I've always played left." Crosby looked at Coach like he had snakes coming out of his ears.

"You push off your right foot more than your left. So, for practice today you'll be in right. We'll see how it goes. Boone, Hall, Young, Crosby and Perkins, you're up first with drills." Coach walked over to the side of the boards, severing any further protests from Crosby.

"Where the hell did that come from," Trevor spoke under his breath as the rest of the team moved off the ice.

"Josie," I said, fighting back the urge to smile.

Coach actually listened to her. Wait until she hears about this.

"Josie?" Trevor frowned at me in confusion.

"Yeah. On Saturday, she mentioned to Coach that if we switched Crosby to right instead of left, our line would be stronger."

"Really?" Bryton's eyebrows rose.

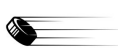
"I guess he'd thought about it after all."

"Wonder if it will work," Bryton mused as we followed behind Trevor, Crosby and Perkins to the other side of the rink.

"We're about to find out," I said.

"Let's see what you can do, Crosby" Trevor patted Crosby on his shoulder. Crosby looked unconvinced as he moved to the right of Trevor.

As I got into position between Trevor and Bryton, I silently prayed Josie was right about this.



"GOOD PRACTICE. Hit the showers and PT if you need it. Practice again tomorrow then away game Wednesday night."

As soon as Coach walked off the ice the guys turned to Crosby.

"Dude, you killed it as RD."

"You should have switched years ago."

Crosby's grin grew wider as each of us complimented him. His

sweaty hair was stuck to his forehead, face red from running drill after drill.

Admittedly, the first drill didn't go so well with him as right defenseman. Crosby kept moving to the left, cross checking Perkins. We'd had to reset and go again which just further aggravated Crosby. It didn't help that Coach stood nearby, intently scrutinizing every drill.

It wasn't until our eighth drill that something in Crosby clicked. Almost two hours later, and the five of us moved around the ice like a team. Just like Josie said, Crosby moved better from the right than left. It would take a few more practices, but he had it.

As Crosby bathed in the attention, I gave him a quick pat on the shoulder before skating to the tunnel. I had a physical therapy appointment, and then I wanted to surprise Josie with the news.

"Is Josie secretly a hockey pro?" Bryton skated up behind me.

"I think she was in her past life," I joked.

"She clearly knows something we don't. Where did she learn so much about hockey?" he asked as we stepped into the locker room.

"She used to watch it a lot with her dad. Apparently, he was a huge fan," I answered.

"Did her father…" Bryton trailed off, having caught me speaking in past tense.

I nodded. "About a year ago." I fell silent for a moment.

I couldn't begin to imagine what it was like losing a parent the way Josie has. My father may have run out on us when I was little, but that was his choice. Josie's dad didn't choose to leave her.

"Are you going to have her meet the family?" Bryton changed the subject as he worked on taking his pads off.

"Oh, meeting the family already, are we?" Trevor asked as he came up behind us and inserted himself into the conversation.

"Mateo's game's this weekend, and I'm thinking about inviting her. I don't want to scare her off, though."

We only met two weeks ago. Is it too soon for her to meet them?

"Does Lan and Mat know about her yet?" Trevor asked.

"Yeah. Mateo noticed I was on my phone when I was over there for dinner and made a comment. Got Landon and my mom asking questions." I hadn't planned on telling my family about Josie so soon, but I should have known there's no way to hide things in my family.

"Going to his game would be a good icebreaker. Not as awkward," Bryton pointed out.

"Just make sure Lan isn't a dick to her," Trevor joked.

I grunted in response. We all knew what a grumpy asshole my older brother could be. The last *girl* I brought home, he instantly disliked and made sure we all knew it. I didn't want to introduce Josie

to him if he would act like an asshole around her.

“Maybe I’ll ask her later and see what she says,” I said, as much to myself as to them.

“Look at our boy growing up,” Trevor winked.

“Fuck off.” Rolling my eyes I shoved his shoulder as I started taking my hockey gear off.

Wanting to get out of there as fast as I could, I made quick work of showering before changing into a pair of sweats and a long sleeve shirt. I said a quick bye to the guys, and promised to text them later, then I left the locker room and headed down to the PT office. PT mostly consisted of lots of stretching while two of the team's physical therapists stood by to make sure I did it right. Since I was seeing Asher tomorrow before our away game, I only stayed for half an hour.

Since it was only a little after 11 once I finished, I pulled into the parking lot of a popular coffee shop a few minutes from the practice arena. I didn’t yet know how Josie liked her coffee, so I took a stab in the dark—I wasn’t going to show up to her office empty handed.

The moment I stepped into the coffee shop, I instantly felt eyes on me. The attention wasn’t new, I’d been dealing with it since my rookie season, when my name first started frequenting the sport channels.

The Toronto Knights rookie scored three goals in one game. Boone is the youngest in the playoffs.

Once that started, suddenly the attention turned to my looks. It was weird seeing fan edits of myself circling the internet. Entertainment shows had little to say about my game and more about my looks. Next thing I knew I was offered modeling jobs—specifically in my underwear, as my fan base moved beyond hockey fans.

So, it came as no surprise that half the eyes on me belonged to women. If their boyfriends or husbands weren’t fans, then they’d at least seen pictures of me around the city. I wasn’t lying to Josie when I said women frequently approached me, wanting to flirt and get their own names out there.

I kept to myself as I approached the counter. Ignoring the stares boring into the back of my head, or the flirty way the barista fluttered her eyelashes at me as I ordered two coffees. After paying, I moved off to the side, pulling my phone out to try and look busy.

Should have worn a baseball cap.

“Excuse me?”

Pasting a smile on my face I glanced up. A young kid around the same age as Mateo stood in front of me. “Are you Wyatt Boone?”

“I am.” Seeing the way his eyes widened in awe turned my smile into a genuine one. There was something sweet in seeing a kid starstruck when they met me. I still find it crazy sometimes that it's *me* who they are starstruck by.

“Can I get a picture?”

“Of course.”

There was no way I was going to say no to the kid, even if that opened the floor to everyone else approaching me.

As he moved to stand beside me, lifting his phone for a selfie, I bent down, flashing a smile. After snapping a few photos, he stepped back and faced me again.

“Thank you!” The excitement coming off him was almost palpable. “Good luck on Wednesday's game.” With another wide smile, he turned and walked off.

Just as I thought, the moment the kid stepped away, others in the shop approached me. Even if some didn’t know who I was, the moment they saw people taking pictures, they assumed I was someone famous.

For the next fifteen minutes, I took picture after picture with everyone in the coffee shop. More than one woman got a little too close, their hands skimming my stomach or trailing down my arm. I wasn’t even surprised to find the barista wrote her number on my coffee cup when I was finally free to collect my order.

I high tailed it out of the coffee shop and into my car. While I didn’t mind fan interactions, I still found it overwhelming, and I found myself longing to be around Josie more than ever.

Thankfully, traffic wasn’t too bad, and I pulled up in front of her office in record time. I hesitated for a second, only now wondering if showing up unannounced would get her in trouble.

Worst case scenario, I’ll get to say a quick hello, give her the coffee and leave. At least I’ll see her.

Grabbing both coffees, I headed for the front door. The office building housed several businesses, so I followed the signs for *Fusion Weekly*. As I carefully shouldered open the door, I found myself in a foyer. I glanced around, wondering where to go when I finally saw someone walking across the room, staring at their phone.

“Excuse me?”

The woman looked up with an annoyed expression, before her eyes widened slightly as I took a step towards her.

“Do you know where Josie Scott’s office is?”

It took her a moment before she answered. “Uh, yeah, I can show you.”

As she led me through a corridor, she shot me a curious look over her shoulder, but I just smiled politely.

We passed two offices and what looked like a conference room before the woman in front of me slowed.

“Her office is straight ahead.”

“Thank you.” I flashed her a smile before she headed back in the

other direction, not without glancing back at me a final time. Standing there, I suddenly felt a surge of nerves.

It was crazy how Josie made me feel like a teenager trying to muster up the courage to go ask his crush out. I hadn't felt nervous around a woman in years, yet there I was, clutching the coffees as though they were my lifeline as my heart raced.

Pull it together, Boone. If I can play in front of thousands of screaming fans, I can bring a girl a coffee.

I slowly headed towards her office, and as soon as I poked my head into Josie's office and saw her sitting at her desk, looking down at a bunch of pictures in front of her, my nerves abated a little. Her brown hair was pulled into a messy looking bun, a few pieces framing her face as she focused on her work.

God, she looks beautiful.

"Knock, knock."

At my voice her head snapped up, eyes widening in surprise. "Wyatt!"

"I brought coffee," I said as I stepped towards her, holding one out to her. "Sorry for just stopping by. Hope I'm not imposing."

"Not at all," she beamed as she stood up. "You're a lifesaver. I was just thinking how much I could use a coffee."

Meeting her halfway around her desk I bent down and caressed her lips with mine as she looked up at me. The action took her by surprise, but she eagerly met my kiss. Before I could get carried away, I pulled back.

I could easily lose myself in Josie.

"Sorry," I apologized, even though I wasn't. How could I ever be sorry for kissing Josie?

"Don't be." Josie shook her head, her tongue darting out to lick her bottom lip. The simple sent a barrage of dirty images through my mind. "Thank you for the coffee."

"I wasn't sure what you liked, so I hope it's okay."

"It's perfect."

I felt like a caveman providing for his woman when Josie took a sip of her coffee and sighed contently.

Rising onto her toes, Josie pressed a quick kiss to my lips, the taste of coffee lingering on her lips. "What are you doing here? I thought you had practice."

"I did. Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that."

"Oh?"

I smiled as she leaned forward, eager to hear.

"We were about to start practice, when Coach decided he wanted to make a change. He switched Crosby to right defenseman."

"Are you serious?" Her eyes got adorably wide. "He took my

suggestion?"

"Yep," I nodded, my grin growing wider.

"How did it go? Did he do well? Oh god, it was a disaster, wasn't it?"

I laughed aloud. "Turns out Crosby is a better right defenseman than a left one." Josie's jaw went slack, and she flopped back in her chair. I knew telling her in person was the right call.

"You're playing with me, right?"

"Nope. Took him a bit to get used to the switch, but by the end of practice it was like he'd always played that position." It was so cute watching her freak out yet try to act like she wasn't.

"Woah, that's…"

"Impressive," I supplied. "None of us noticed that about him until you said something."

"I'm basically a hockey guru," she joked.

"So it seems. Though I must confess, there's another reason for my visit," I said after a moment. "I was wondering if you'd like to come over for dinner later?"

"At your place?"

"If that's okay? Or we can go out somewhere if you're more comfortable with that."

"I'd love to come over."

"Any preference on what you want to eat?"

I knew what I wanted to eat, but I sure as hell wasn't going to voice it.

"I'm good with anything. No allergies either."

"Perfect," I smiled, my heart soaring as she returned it.

JOSIE

"Do you want some wine?" Wyatt called out from his kitchen.

"Sure." I replied, keeping my eyes firmly on the view before me. When Wyatt invited me over for dinner, he'd failed to mention he lived in the penthouse. I didn't even know our apartment building *had* a penthouse.

The view was amazing. Up on the 15th floor, you could see most of downtown Toronto. I was certain I could see part of the stadium from here. The slow descent of the sun cast a golden glow over the city.

I can't wait to see what it looks like with all the city lights.

"Here you go." Wyatt appeared at my side and handed me a glass of wine.

"Thanks." I looked away from the view to an even better one. Wyatt was casually dressed in a pair of jeans and a long sleeve shirt, and damn, he looked amazing. "Why didn't you tell me you have such a great view? My window overlooks the parking lot."

That wasn't the only drastic difference between our apartments. Aside from the view, Wyatt's apartment was at least three times the size of mine—and I hadn't considered mine small. I had a decent sized apartment with a kitchen and dining room, living room, good sized bedroom and bathroom.

From the moment I walked through Wyatt's door, I was greeted by a spacious living area and stunning floor-to-ceiling windows. A full-sized kitchen with gorgeous countertops were to the right, with a huge dining table off to the side.

Before I got sidetracked with the view of the city, I noticed a staircase on the opposite side of the room that I assumed led to the master bedroom. There also appeared to be a hallway leading to other rooms. All in all, the place was incredible.

"The view at night is great, but sunrise is the best."

"I can imagine. Bet the view was the selling point."

"It was. Well, for me it was. When I brought my mom over for a look, it was the kitchen that sold her."

I smiled at the mention of his mom. He spoke about her often, and it was clear as day that he loved her very much.

"Whenever she's over you can't pry her from the kitchen," Wyatt

continued.

"Do your brothers come over often?"

"My older brother Landon will come over for a few beers and a game, once in a while. My younger brother Mateo would live here if he could. Says it's a real 'babe magnet'."

"Total babe magnetic," I agreed with a nod.

"When he's not busy with school and sports he'll come spend a night or two."

Part of me was jealous of Wyatt's brother. I always wanted a sibling. To have your own built-in best friend, and even if you got mad at each other, you got over it quickly.

"They sound really great."

"They are. My younger brother has a game this weekend," Wyatt said, and I thought I heard hesitation in his voice. "Do you want to go?"

Was he asking me to meet his family?

"You don't have to," he quickly amended. "Just thought I'd extend the invitation."

Meeting his family sounded nerve-wracking as hell. I couldn't remember the last time I met a guy's family, especially one as close as Wyatt's.

What if they don't like me?

The people-pleaser in me wanted them to like me—and I got the sense that it would mean a lot to Wyatt too.

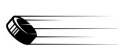
"They wouldn't mind if I tagged along?" I finally asked.

"Not at all," Wyatt shook his head. "Think about it, there's no rush."

Agreeing to meet his family wasn't a simple decision. Meeting them meant things between us were getting a bit more serious.

"Hungry?" he asked after a moment.

"Starving."



"YOU DID NOT," I said.

"I did. Trevor bet that I couldn't, so I climbed onto the roof and jumped in the pool."

"You're crazy," I laughed and shook my head.

"I like things that make my heart race." He looked right at me. I may have had a couple glasses of wine, but there was no mistaking the heat in his gaze. The tension between us was so thick you could cut the air with a knife.

The two of us had skirted around the sexual tension all night. From the moment I stepped into his kitchen and watched him cook, I'd found the scene strangely erotic. It only intensified as we ate, exchanging sultry looks that did nothing to abate the growing ache between my legs. I was pretty sure Wyatt knew it too, because every time I shifted in my seat his eyes trailed over me.

Now, our dinner long since finished, we sat together on his plush, leather couch and gazed out at the night sky. My body was curled towards his, knees resting against him, his hand on my thigh. It was beyond difficult to not imagine his hand moving higher.

"Josie?"

I looked up from his hand—I hadn't heard a single word he'd said. "Hmm?"

"What were you thinking about?"

"Oh…uh, nothing."

"Nothing, huh?" His hand tightened its grip on my thigh as I studied his face. The look in his eyes flamed the fire inside of me that's burned since we met.

"Yep?" Although it came out more as a question.

Just kiss him already.

"Although I could be convinced to tell you." My new-found confidence surprised even me.

"Is that right?" he murmured.

I nodded, swallowing thickly.

"What would it take to convince you?"

Our bodies inched together, eliminating any space left between us.

"There's a number of ways," I whispered as I leaned forward so our lips brushed together. My plan to tease him a little flew out the window as Wyatt pressed his mouth against mine, deepening the kiss. Our lips moved in sync, and when his tongue teased the seam of my mouth, I eagerly reciprocated, letting our tongues entwine.

I was so lost in the haze of the kiss that I didn't notice Wyatt's hand moving upwards until I suddenly found myself straddling him. It was as though my body had a mind of its own, as I settled in his lap.

Feeling the hard length of him through my jeans, I rubbed against him, satisfied I wasn't the only one turned on. The sound of Wyatt's moans enticed me to grind down harder.

Is there anything sexier than hearing a man moan for you?

Wyatt's hands gripped my ass, and at his encouragement, I circled my hips against him. My fingers ran through his hair, tugging at the base of his neck.

"I'm going to need you to stop, babe," he murmured against my lips.

"Why?" I kissed the side of his mouth, moving along his jaw.

“I want you to be completely sure this is what you want.” As he spoke his hands still gripped my ass, moving me back and forth on his lap.

There’s nothing I want more than this. I want to feel every inch of him, inside and out.

For once I wasn’t going to let self-doubt creep in and ruin the moment.

Pulling back, I gently tugged his hair, our gazes leveled. I needed him to see I spoke the truth.

“I want this. Do you?” I heard the echo of insecurity in my voice, but I ignored it.

“Do you feel this?” Wyatt asked, as he flexed his hips upwards, making me gasp at his hardness. “This is what you do to me.”

The intensity in his eyes lit every inch of me on fire. “So yes, I want this.”

I barely let him get the words out before I kissed him again. He met me with the same amount of fervor, and my hands moved from his hair to the bottom of his shirt, tugging it upwards.

As his shirt got stuck on his chin, I giggled. Laughing, Wyatt lifted his arms, helping me pull it the rest of the way off, before discarding it over the side of the couch. I leaned back on his thighs taking in the view.

Seeing him shirtless in person was a hundred times better than on the billboards around town. My fingers and mouth itched to caress every muscular ridge. Even sitting down, I could see his eight pack.

Hockey players really are in the best shape.

Wyatt’s eyes twinkled as I took in the sight, and I made a silent vow that I would know every inch of his body by night's end.

When his hands tugged at the bottom of my sweater, I hesitated for a second before raising my arms. It’d been a while since anyone saw me shirtless, let alone naked. In my last relationship, we’d only slept together twice, and it was always *him, him, him*. The sex was mediocre at best, and I never once finished.

It took a lot to get me to the spot where I could even think about sleeping with someone else after my abusive ex—where I didn’t criticize everything about myself in the mirror, letting his words take control over me.

I fought against the urge to cover myself once he tugged my shirt off. Though all thoughts escaped me as Wyatt leaned forward and pressed his lips between the valley of my breasts. My breath hitched, and my nipples immediately hardened beneath my simple black bra.

When Wyatt tilted his head up to look at me, I almost groaned at the loss of his lips on me. His hair was mused from my fingers and his blue eyes looked a shade darker.

“You are stunning,” he whispered. I felt the heat rise into my cheeks at his words, but I forgot my self-consciousness as he peppered kisses along the tops of my breasts. The sensation of his thumbs brushing the skin at my hips sent goosebumps rushing across my skin.

“Can I?” His hands moved around to my back, his fingers playing with the clasp of my bra. The fact he asked for permission made me smile. At my nod, he flicked the clasp, his eyes following the straps as they slid down my arms.

As my bra fell to my lap, Wyatt stared at my breasts like it was Christmas morning. They weren’t big by any means—my ex once mentioned that I should get a boob job. Yet, right now, I didn’t feel an ounce of insecurity about them.

How could I, when Wyatt looked at them like they were the best thing he’s ever seen?

He wasted no time in leaning in, latching his mouth around one stiff nipple while he massaged my other breast with his hand.

Having my nipples played with had never done much for me in the past, but the way Wyatt licked, sucked, and nibbled sent my back with pleasure. I gripped his shoulders, grinding my hips against his lap, as he moved from one breast to the other.

I could feel the wetness soaking through my underwear and dampening my jeans.

I don’t think I’ve ever felt this turned on in my life.

“Wyatt,” I breathed, needing to feel more of him. All of him.

“What do you want, baby?” He pulled back and I whimpered in protest.

“You.”

“I’m already yours,” he said as he stood, cupping my ass with his hands, before gently lowering me until my feet touched the floor.

He unbuttoned my jeans and tried pulling them down, but my jeans were tight and didn’t budge. My lips twitched as he tugged harder, making me rock against him.

“What the hell are these made of?” he grumbled.

“Put those muscles to use,” I teased. The little glare he flashed me made me grin.

Wyatt sat on the couch, making it easier for him to yank my jeans off before casting them to the side. It didn’t escape me that with me standing before him, his head was directly in front of my pussy. My thin, purple underwear did little to hide how turned on I was.

If I’d known this morning that I’d end up at Wyatt’s, I would have worn matching lingerie.

Thankfully, my underwear seemed to be the least of his concerns.

“Look how wet you are,” he murmured, reaching forward and gently pushing apart my thighs to widen my stance.

Frozen in anticipation, I could do nothing but stand there, legs spread, as he rubbed his thumb over my panties, directly over my clit. My hips bucked, and I instinctively grabbed his head to keep myself upright. Wyatt gripped the front of my panties and yanked them upwards between my folds. At the sight, he growled softly.

Keeping his grip on my underwear he grabbed my left leg and lifted it up over his shoulder, spreading me open even more. I held my breath as he leaned forward, pressing his lips directly over my clit through my underwear, causing my eyes to roll back.

He's barely touched me yet and I'm already coming undone.

I forced myself to look down and found him staring up at me from between my legs.

Damn, that's hot.

Keeping his eyes on me, he pulled my underwear to the side and ran his tongue along my pussy in one long lick.

This is by far the most erotic moment of my life.

Wyatt continued licking my pussy, and he groaned into me, sending a rush of vibration through me that made me weak at the knees.

It was like just by tasting me, it unlocked whatever resolve he had left. All I could do was hold onto his head as he ate my pussy like a man starved.

I had no idea what he did with his tongue, but my toes curled into his carpet as my eyes closed with the bliss of it. Losing control of myself, I ground against his face, using his hair as my anchor. Any insecurities I'd had were long gone as I completely lost myself to his touch.

My legs trembled as he drew me closer to the edge. No one had ever made me climax this way before, and yet I was mere seconds away from coming all over his face.

"Wyatt," I moaned, so close, when he suddenly pulled back. My eyes shot open as I gasped.

Wyatt stared up at me, licking his lips before giving me a satisfied moan. The lower half of his face had a sheen to it.

I'm literally all over his face.

"Why did you stop?" I panted, my body trying to come to terms with the sudden loss of his touch.

"Because," he tapped my swollen clit with one finger, making me jerk. "When you come, it's going to be all over my cock while it's deep inside of you."

JOSIE

His words almost made me come right then and there. Gently lifting my leg off his shoulder, Wyatt slowly stood, his eyes locked on mine.

There's something so…dirty and hot about him standing there in his pants while I'm standing here in just my panties.

My eyes ran down his bare chest to the front of his jeans, which looked uncomfortably tight. I hesitantly reached my hand out, fingertips brushing against the fabric. I could feel the heat of Wyatt's stare on me as I traced the outline of his cock.

If I wasn't so turned on and ready to come, I would have taken my time. Instead, I made quick work of undoing his pants, dipping my hand underneath to cup him through his underwear. As Wyatt grunted, I smirked, eager to elicit the same things within him that he had in me.

God, he's so hard and thick.

My mouth watered at the thought of tasting him. As I slipped my hand under the waistband of his boxers, feeling him bare in my hand, I peeked up at him. His jaw was clenched, eyes drawing me in as I grazed his tip with my thumb.

There's a certain kind of…power, seeing a man moan at your touch, and I enjoyed watching Wyatt trying to hold himself back—especially with the way I teased the head.

I dropped my gaze, but he gripped my chin and angled my head back up. His grip was firm as he peered down at me.

"Keep smirking and I'll put that mouth to better use." I clenched my thighs together at the thought. It just further tempted me to see how far I could push him. I squeezed my hand, and Wyatt hissed through his teeth.

"As much as I love the feel of your hand on my cock, I need to feel your pussy," he demanded.

I like this side of Wyatt—I hadn't expected such a dirty mouth.

Needing him just as badly, I dropped his length needing him inside of me. While he took his pants off, I took off my underwear, leaving the two of us standing there, naked.

While I felt vulnerable standing there, completely bare for him to see, but for the first time, I didn't feel self-conscious. How could I,

when Wyatt looked at me like I was something to devour.

He grabbed me by the waist, moving me backwards until my back hit the cold glass window.

"You have no idea how much self-control it's taking to not turn you around and fuck you against this window."

"Why don't you?" I breathed, arching my back so that my hard nipples pressed against his chest.

"Does someone like the thought of being fucked against a window, where anyone could see her?" Wyatt dipped his head, running his lips across my ear and sending a shiver of pleasure through me. "Of being taken regardless if someone is watching or not?"

Part of me thought that I shouldn't be turned on by idea, and yet, just thinking about it had me squirming against the window.

Because I do want that. I want him to take me. To give someone else control of my wants and needs. Someone like Wyatt, who I know deep down in my soul won't hurt me.

"You want it, don't you?" Wyatt pulled back and stared down at me with a smirk. My body felt like it was on fire, like I would explode if I didn't feel Wyatt inside of me right that second. Tilting my head back, I looked into his eyes, and for the first time in my life I let myself give in.

"I want it."

In one smooth motion, Wyatt flipped me around and pressed me against the window. The cold of the glass against my cheek and my chest made me gasp.

"Spread your legs," Wyatt demanded in my ear. When I didn't move fast enough, he nudged the inside of my ankles, widening my stance so that I had to grip the window ledge to hold myself up. As Wyatt placed a hand on my lower back, I arched against him until I felt my ass up in the air, everything on display.

"Beautiful."

I was too turned on to care that I was completely exposed.

His hand trailed down my back to my ass, massaging it for a second before he drew back his hand and spanked me. I yelped and jerked forward as my ass stung from the impact. Wyatt gently rubbed the sting away before he spanked me again.

"Oh." I moaned.

Encouraged, Wyatt smacked my ass four more times in rapid succession. I leaned my cheek into the window, eyes closed, breathing heavy against the pain. *I've never felt so wet in my entire life.*

"Wyatt." I needed him.

Now.

No more teasing or playing.

Thankfully, I felt the tip of his cock rub against my throbbing

pussy. I moaned at the feeling arching my back further. “Please.” I begged.

“Good girl.”

When I felt the head of his cock rub against my clit, I jerked so hard I almost put my head through the glass.

If he doesn’t enter me right now, I’m going to lose my shit.

He paused, lowering his mouth to my ear. “Condom?”

I lifted my head from the window and looked at him over my shoulder. “I’m clean and have an IUD. I haven’t done this in a while,” I admitted.

“I’m clean too. We have to test regularly on the team.” he replied, still rubbing his cock against my pussy, driving me mad. Although he seemed hesitant to continue, and rightfully so. I had no idea what past women had tried to do with him. I wouldn’t put it past someone to try and get pregnant with Wyatt’s child.

“We can get a condom.” It would kill me to wait another moment, but I would.

Wyatt shook his head. “No. I want to feel you.” He met my eyes once more. “If you want to stop, just say the word and we will.”

“I will,” I promised.

Ever so slowly, I felt him push inside of me and my eyes widened. He was by far the biggest I’d ever had, and I knew it would be a tight fit.

Thank God I’m already dripping wet.

Inch by inch, his cock filled me. Through the reflection in the window, I could see Wyatt’s face was tight as he worked himself inside me, as though he was trying his hardest not to slam all the way in.

I can’t wait any longer.

Using the window, I pushed backwards and took the rest of his length in me in one go. We groaned in unison, the sound echoing around the room.

Fuck he’s huge. I can practically feel him in my throat.

His thumb made contact with my clit making me clench around him. The soft circles helped ease the tension in my body, and I started moving my hips slowly.

“Just like that, baby.”

In a matter of minutes, I was thrusting back against him, needing more. Wyatt’s hand moved from my waist to my head, as he grabbed a fist full of my hair and yanked. Never in my life has someone taken control during sex like Wyatt.

Who knew I would love it so much? Wyatt didn’t treat me like I was a fragile flower, and I loved it.

“Keep those hands on the window,” he instructed as he slid his

cock out of my pussy, pulling out all the way to the tip before thrusting back in. My fingers curled against the glass; my mouth open in a silent gasp.

I felt hyper-aware of every single inch of him as he glided in and out of my pussy. When he picked up the pace, my eyes rolled back in my head, each thrust pushing me against the window.

"If anyone looked up at the window right now, they'd see me fucking you," Wyatt grunted in my ear.

In response, I clenched myself around his cock, smiling to myself as he moaned.

"You'd like someone seeing you get owned, wouldn't you."

Apparently, I did, moaning loudly as I felt myself grow wetter by the second. Wyatt's thrusts came hard and fast, each one bringing me closer and closer to coming. It was all I could think about.

With every moan of his name, Wyatt fucked me harder. The sound of our skin slapping together echoed around his living room. I was so lost in how amazing he felt inside of me that the building could fall around us, and I wouldn't notice.

"I need…" I trailed off, unable to form a complete sentence.

"Come for me, baby."

All it took was a few strokes on my clit and I felt myself erupt. Wave after pleasurable wave washed over me as Wyatt continued fucking me. I had no sense of anything other than my orgasm as his cock and fingers sent me higher and higher.

Wyatt groaned, burying himself to the hilt inside me, and a split-second later, I felt him pulse inside of me. The intensity of it set off another orgasm.

Two? How is that possible?

His hand left my hair, coming to rest beside my head against the window as he leaned against my back. Our sweat soaked bodies pressed against one another. The two of us struggled to catch our breath as we came down from our highs.

My entire body left like Jello. My legs threatened to buckle at any moment. I could feel Wyatt's cock twitching inside me every few seconds, and I knew the moment he pulled out I'd have cum running down my legs.

Slowly, Wyatt stood back up. I shivered as he softly ran his hand down my back to my ass. His touch was so gentle, such a contrast to a moment ago.

I tugged my bottom lip between my teeth as he gently slid his cock out of me, leaving me feeling empty. I felt his finger run between my tender folds. "You look so pretty with my cum leaking out of you."

The dirty compliment sent a shiver down my spine as I felt myself clench.

Wyatt lewdly fingered his cum back into my pussy and I moaned at his touch.

“Let's get you cleaned up,” he murmured, withdrawing his fingers.

My limbs felt heavy as I used what was left of my strength to slowly push myself off the window. As Wyatt wrapped a strong arm around my waist to support me, I tried to thank him, but I couldn’t speak.

I haven’t come that hard since…ever?

When I stumbled into Wyatt he chuckled softly.

“Here, let me help.” In one sweep, he held me in his arms and carried me towards the stairs. “Are you feeling okay?”

I smiled at the concern in his voice. “More than okay. That was…”Again, all words escaped me.

“Amazing?” Wyatt suggested.

“Amazing.” I echoed.

Effortlessly, Wyatt carried me up the stairs and into the master bedroom. The first thing I noticed was how clean it was. Definitely not what I expected of a bachelor.

Wyatt carried me into the bathroom, which was easily twice the size of my own, and lowered me carefully into a seated position on the counter. My body felt bare without him pressed against me, and I was tempted to wrap my legs around him so he couldn’t leave.

Instead, I silently watched him as he grabbed a washcloth and ran it under the tap. Then he gently spread my legs once more and knelt before me. Out of everything we’d just done, watching him wipe me clean of his cum made me blush. Not like he hadn’t just seen every inch of me. Somehow, this was even more intimate.

Once Wyatt had taken his time making sure I was cleaned up, he leaned forward and kissed my inner thigh before straightening. He quickly ran the washcloth over himself before he stepped between my legs, his hands resting on the counter on either side of my thighs, caging me against him.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” His eyes roamed my body, checking for any marks. Even if he had left any, I didn’t care. Never had I enjoyed sex so much, especially when it was the first time with someone. Usually, it's all awkward and someone comes first and that’s it.

Not with Wyatt. Oh no, definitely not with Wyatt.

Part of me felt jealous of the girls before me, who’d taught Wyatt how to excel in bed. Honestly, I was jealous of anyone who was with him before. Yet, another part of me was thankful, because all that experience led to the best orgasm I’d ever had.

“You didn’t hurt me,” I said softly.

“Good. If I ever go too far, tell me, and I’ll stop immediately.”

“I know.” I pecked his lips once, twice, before leaning back on the

counter, smiling softly. His eyes traced every line of my body.

His concern was adorable, but what he was yet to understand was that I liked it rough as much as he had.

“How do you feel about staying the night?” Wyatt asked after a moment, his hands moving to my thighs. I sensed he wanted me to stay but wouldn’t push me if I didn’t want to.

The teeny tiny part of me that had worried he’d want me to leave after fucking me disappeared. The fact he wanted me to stay and meet his family proved to me that this wasn’t a quick one and done.

“I’d love to.”

JOSIE

I woke up wrapped around Wyatt's hard, warm body, his legs wedged between mine. His strong arms wrapped tightly around my waist, pinning me against him. Despite my nakedness underneath the covers, the warmth coming off him kept me warm and comfortable.

I wouldn't mind staying here all day.

Unfortunately, I needed to pee and check the time. Staying over on a weeknight probably wasn't smart. The last thing I wanted to do was get up and go to work after the night we'd had.

With my bladder pleading, I wiggled out of Wyatt's arms. It took some maneuvering on my part, but I managed to do it. On my way to the bathroom, I passed by a chair with a sweatshirt hanging off the back of it. Glancing over my shoulder at Wyatt sleeping, I grabbed it, pulling it on over my head.

The soft gray sweatshirt reached the tops of my knees, enveloping me in Wyatt's cologne. I was half tempted to steal it since it smelled so good. Quietly closing the bathroom door behind me, I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror. Thanks to Wyatt, my hair looked like I'd gone through a tornado. Gone were the cute curls I'd styled the day before.

I'm definitely going to have to run down to my apartment and try to salvage this. I knew if I lifted the sweatshirt, I'd find love bites all over me.

My lips were slightly swollen, and I silently prayed they'd return to normal before work, or Lydia would know for sure something happened.

After I'd agreed to spend the night, Wyatt swept me off the bathroom counter and all but threw me on his bed. I thought I was exhausted, but all it took was a heated kiss, and I was ready to go again.

Despite the fact we'd fucked multiple times last night, all I wanted to do was walk back into Wyatt's bedroom and straddle him. It didn't matter that I was pleasantly sore between my legs.

As I used the bathroom I replayed the night in my head.

Wyatt took control so easily, saying and doing things I'd always wanted, but have never felt confident enough to ask for.

The dirty, dominating side was a pleasant surprise. Not what I'd expected from the cute, sweet, Wyatt Boone I'd come to know.

And I loved every second of it.

Peeking out of the bathroom, I found Wyatt still sound asleep, only now he lay on his back, the sheet barely covering his lower body. I padded quietly towards the bed, staring down at him—the mere sight of him took my breath away.

He's gorgeous.

I knew men didn't like to be referred to as such, but Wyatt Boone was.

For starters, there was his body, built for his sport. Even though it was clear he'd sustained more than one broken nose, he was one of the most handsome men I'd ever met. Even better, he had a heart of gold.

I fought the urge to pinch myself.

How could someone so amazing like me?

Over the years, I'd fought to regain my self-confidence. Relearning and teaching myself that I am worthy of things, despite what anyone else thought. I had Tasha and Lydia to thank for helping me, for teaching me that just because some horrible ex needed to make me feel small to make him feel big, didn't mean I was.

Yet, despite my hard work, being with Wyatt brought back the old 'am I good enough' voices. Yet, I didn't want to go back to the old me, always questioning my self-worth.

I'm not going to slip back into bad habits. That's not me anymore.

With new resolve, I crawled back into bed. A quick glance at the bedside clock told me it was only 6 o'clock and I had a little time before I had to get ready for work.

A sudden idea came to me, and with a rush of nerves, I quietly crawled across the bed, until I was kneeling between Wyatt's legs.

I could make out his morning wood under the sheet that did little to hide the sheer size of him. Last night, Wyatt made it all about me—which I wasn't complaining about, but I wanted my turn.

Keeping my eyes on his face, I peeled the sheet away, revealing every inch of him. Instantly, my thighs clenched, turned on at the sight before me.

I need to know how he tastes, and I need to know now.

I tentatively reached out and trailed my fingers along the length of his cock. He was so hard, and I wondered if it hurt. As I wrapped my fist around him, giving him a little stroke, I felt him twitch in my hand.

I wasn't sure if he was pretending to be asleep or not as I stroked the length of his cock. Taking my time, I focused on the feel of him in my hand. I peeked up at him briefly before moving down onto my

elbows and taking the tip of him into my mouth.

I'd always believed that if a man was willing to go down on me, then I should do the same in return. There is a sort of power in making a man moan when you have him in your mouth, and I planned to make sure Wyatt felt the same way he'd made me feel as he ate my pussy.

Within seconds, Wyatt woke up, groaning softly as he reached his hand down and rested it on my head. "Fuck." he moaned.

I glanced up at him with his cock in my mouth—he looked at me with sleepy eyes, beyond adorable.

"Morning." I pulled his cock out of my mouth and licked down the length, grinning to myself as his body shuddered beneath me.

"Very good morning," he said, voice raspy from sleep.

With growing confidence, I trailed my tongue over his tip while squeezing the base of him. The way he pulsed in my hand turned me on like nothing else. I could feel myself already dripping.

Working my way back up, I tongued the slit of his cock. Wyatt moaned deeply, and I watched as Wyatt closed his eyes and leaned his head back. His fingers threaded through my hair gripping the strands.

"You look gorgeous with my cock in your mouth."

The words sent an electric tremor through my pussy.

Who knew I loved praise so much?

Encouraged, I dipped my head, taking more of his cock into my mouth, my lips stretching around him as I tongued the underside. As he twitched and pulsed in my mouth, I groaned against him. Closing my eyes, I bobbed my head up and down, taking more and more of his cock until the tip hit the back of my throat. I gagged, pulling up as the drool hung off his cock and my mouth. Wyatt opened his eyes, taking in the scene before he focused on my face. He tightened his grip on my head, a silent command. One I eagerly obeyed.

Teasingly, I took a few shallow sucks of his cock before taking him as far back into my throat as I could, fighting against the urge to gag. I held onto his thighs, trying my best to breathe through my nose.

Wyatt held my head down for another second before releasing me. I panted, tears running down my face. Yet, the way he looked at me made me feel like I was the sexiest woman on the planet.

"Such a good girl."

Another phrase I didn't know I loved until Wyatt.

"Open your mouth," he instructed, gripping my hair in his fist.

Opening wide, I let him push me down on his cock. Wyatt bobbed my head up and down, each pass down taking more and more.

"You can do it. Breathe through your nose."

If I thought I was turned on before, that was nothing compared to right now. I could feel myself dripping, my hips wiggling in the air

wanting something to ease the ache between my legs.

With his cock down my throat Wyatt held me there for almost a minute before releasing me again. I only got a second to inhale deeply before he was back in my mouth. The way he used me was one of the hottest, dirtiest, things I'd ever experienced. I was loving every second.

Wyatt's hips bucked, forcing more of his cock into my mouth, his moans filling my ears. Knowing he was close; I doubled my efforts.

"If you don't want me to cum in your mouth, you'd better stop right now," Wyatt spoke through clenched teeth.

I didn't say a word, or rather, I couldn't with a mouth full of cock, and instead took him another inch deeper. I needed his cum more than I needed air.

The closer he got the more erratic his thrusts got. I stayed exactly where I was, letting him use my mouth. Drool hung off my chin, eyes watering, but I never felt more powerful.

Closing my eyes I focused on not gagging.

"Eyes on me," Wyatt demanded. My eyes flew open. "Good girl."

With our eyes locked on each other, Wyatt pumped his cock into my mouth one, two, three, more times before shuddering, his cock buried in my mouth. I swallowed spurt after spurt as he groaned loudly.

When he finally collapsed back on the bed, I dragged my lips back up his cock, letting him go with a *pop*. Despite the fact I was completely out of breath, I gave his length a final lick before sitting back on my heels.

I felt extremely proud of myself.

Wyatt sat up, eyes clearer and cheeks flushed.

"Get over here." He didn't wait as he reached out and grabbed me, hauling me up the bed until I was straddling his stomach. Before I could protest, he smashed his lips against mine. The sweatshirt I wore had ridden up, so my bare pussy pressed against him.

Wyatt didn't seem to care that my mouth had just been on his cock as he kissed me deeply.

"Best fucking way to wake up," he mumbled between kisses.

I giggled against his lips.

"Seriously, you didn't have to do that." Wyatt finally stopped kissing me and leaned back against his headboard.

"I know, but I wanted to."

If this is the reaction I get, I'll gladly suck his cock any time.

My fingers traced patterns on his chest as his thumbs grazed the skin of my hips.

"As much as I'd love to sit here with you, I have to get ready for work," I sighed. It was the last thing I wanted to do.

“I have practice in a bit, too.”

We remained like that for a moment, neither of us wanting to move, but I knew I needed to get back to my apartment to shower and change. Reluctantly, I slid off Wyatt and the bed, and got to my feet.

Now to find my clothes. Are they still out in the living room?

I only made it two steps towards the door before Wyatt grabbed me around the waist and hurled me over his shoulder.

“Wyatt!” I squealed, taken by surprise. “What are you doing?”

“Sharing water and saving the planet,” he said as he smacked my ass. Reaching down, I smacked his own ass in response, but Wyatt just laughed and carried me to the bathroom.

“All about saving the planet, huh?”

“Yep. Save the turtles.”

I laughed at the way he said it. Walking into his bathroom, he gently set me on my feet and moved towards the shower to start the water.

“I need to go and get ready,” I said, crossing my arms.

“You need to shower. I need to shower. Why not shower together and save a lot of water,” he said, shooting me a smug look over his shoulder. “You want to save the planet, right?”

“Yeah…”

“Plus,” he said, making his way back towards me, reaching for the hem of the sweatshirt. I obediently lifted my arms as he tugged it up and over my head, my nipples immediately hardening in the cool bathroom.

“I got to come. Now it’s your turn,” he grinned.

There was no chance to protest, not that I was going to, as he picked me up once again and walked the two of us into the shower. His hard cock pressed against my pussy.

“For the turtles,” I laughed.

JOSIE

"It's been so long since we've had a girl's night," Tasha said, pouring tequila in the margaritas she was currently making. "Mila's coming right?"

"Yeah, she texted me that she'd be here soon. Lydia's on her way too." I finished putting a bunch of snacks in bowls, looking forward to including Mila in our little girl's night. There were no wild plans, just the four of us on the couch, drinking and talking about everything and anything. I also planned to put Wyatt's hockey game on.

Right on cue, a knock sounded on my door. Leaving Tasha to finish up with the drinks, I went to answer the door. A smiling, but nervous looking Mila stood, holding a bottle of wine.

"Hey!" I greeted stepping to the side. "Come in."

"Thanks for inviting me. I brought wine."

"Perfect." I led her to the kitchen where Tasha greeted her with a wide smile. "We're happy you came. Make yourself at home." I waved around my apartment.

"Your place is so cute."

"Thanks. I've slowly made it my own when I moved in a year ago." I moved around my kitchen grabbing glasses for all of us.

"I still can't believe you had no clue Wyatt lived in the same building," Tasha commented.

"You guys never ran into each other?" Mila leaned against the kitchen counter and asked.

"Nope. Or at least, not that I remember." There probably were a few times we passed by one another and had no clue.

"It's fate that you two got stuck together in that elevator," Mila said.

"Most definitely," Tasha agreed.

The three of us stood in the kitchen talking for a few minutes, before another knock came and the door opened. I grinned as Lydia strutted into the apartment also carrying a bottle of wine.

We were set for girls' night.

While Lydia was my boss, she also had that cool, older sister vibe to her. She was only a few years older than me at twenty-nine, although she looked younger with her shorter blonde hair and green

eyes.

"Mila, this is Lydia." I introduced the two, taking Lydia's wine and putting it on the counter. "Her boyfriend plays with Wyatt." While the two greeted each other I moved to the living room, turning the television to the sports channel.

Wyatt's away game was set to air in the next twenty minutes. It felt surreal that I would soon watch the guy I'm seeing on the television.

"Margarita time," Tasha called out.

In a matter of minutes, all four of us nestled in the living room, margaritas in hand, snacks on the table, and the sports channel on. We still had a few minutes before the game started, which meant plenty of time for the girls to grill me about Wyatt.

"How are things going?" Tasha asked, twisting on the couch and throwing her legs over my lap. "You've been a little off the radar the last few days."

I felt myself flush with all their eyes on me. Admittedly, I'd been a bit…busy the last two days. If I wasn't at work, I was with Wyatt. Let's just say his apartment had undergone a good christening lately. It was like the two of us opened the floodgates, and now there was no stopping us. We simply couldn't get enough of each other. In some ways, Wyatt traveling for this week's game was probably a good thing. Can't always be wrapped up in our own bubble.

"She's blushing," Lydia smirked, sipping her drink.

"Something happened," Mila said, her eyebrows raised.

"Come on, tell us," Tasha prodded my thigh with her foot.

"Yeah, was he good with his mouth?" Lydia asked.

"Or his fingers?" Lydia added.

I glared at all three of them, which only made them laugh. Taking a huge gulp of my drink, I shook my head. "You guys are the worst."

"Don't worry. We'll get it out of you soon," Tasha grinned as she poked me with her toe. We both knew I'd tell her eventually—I couldn't keep anything from her.

"The game's starting," I declared, eager to change the subject off my sex life and onto the game.

"WHAT KIND OF CALL WAS THAT!" I yelled at the TV as though the referee could hear me through the screen.

"He barely touched the guy!" Mila shouted right alongside me.

"Oh god, there really are two of them," Lydia muttered beside me.

Echoing Tasha's words from the hockey game days earlier.

"Think we can escape with the wine?" Tasha whispered back.

"We can hear you," I said, shooting them a look. "Besides, we aren't that bad."

"Yeah, you are," Tasha said. "Your neighbors are going to complain. Again. There's a reason I banned hockey in our apartment years ago."

"They only complained twice," I pointed out.

"That you know of," Tasha retorted, shooting me a pointed look. Okay, maybe she was right. Our old landlord said if we didn't keep the noise level down, he would kick us out thanks to those *few* noise complaints.

"Fine." I slumped against the couch and turned my silent attention back to the game. I watched Wyatt skate across the ice, Trevor and Bryton alongside him, weaving in and out of their opponents. It was cool to watch the game on the television, but it didn't compare to watching them play in person. I could almost hear the sound of the skates cutting on the ice and feel the cold air in the arena.

When Wyatt scored his second goal, I let out a little cheer, trying my best not to scream as the buzzer sounded, ending the second period. Mila doing the same.

"What do you guys have planned for this weekend?" Tasha asked.

One by one the others answered. Mila had an event she had to do Friday night but was free Saturday. Lydia said she had to get the next issue ready but could hang out if we wanted to. Tasha turned to me next as all three of them looked at me expectantly.

I'd wanted to wait for the right time to tell them, but it seemed there was no time like the present.

"I'm meeting Wyatt's family." My voice was a little muffled as I sipped from my glass.

"Wait, what did you say?" Tasha leaned in.

"I'm meeting Wyatt's family," I repeated, my cheeks flaming as they waited for me to elaborate. "His younger brother has a football game and Wyatt invited me to come along."

I'd only decided the day before, when I'd overheard him on the phone with his brother. Just hearing how he talked and listened intently to whatever his brother said showed a whole different side to him. A side that loved and cared for his family. They were everything to him, and I wanted to meet the people that made him who he was. Plus, meeting them at a football game should be a lot less nerve wrecking than anywhere else.

"That sounds like it will be fun," Mila smiled. "I've met his family a few times. His mom is probably the sweetest person on the planet."

Her words eased my nerves a little. Meeting a guy's parents was

always awkward in general.

"Do you want to go?" Tasha asked after a moment.

I didn't hesitate. "I do. I just…is it too soon? We've only been seeing each other for two, almost three weeks now, so I don't know."

"Only you can decide what's too soon or not," Lydia spoke.

"That's not helpful," I groaned.

"Jo," Tasha nudged me with her foot. "It's obvious you like him. This is probably the happiest I've ever seen you. I know you're scared, but you can't let the past ruin your life anymore."

Out of everyone in this room, Tasha was the one who'd been there through everything. She'd seen every side of me and still loved me like a sister.

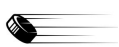
"Who cares if it's too soon to meet his family, if you want to then do it," Tasha said, her brows slightly furrowed. "But if he so much as hurts you, I will chop his balls off."

Only Tasha.

I laughed.

"Thank you." I nudged her leg in return.

"Always."



THE KNIGHTS WON 3-1. Bryton scored the winning goal, which made Mila scream like a banshee at the television. Even though I knew it would be a while before Wyatt would see it, I sent him a congratulatory text.

The girls only stayed a little longer, since we all had work in the morning. I'd barely shut the door when texts flooded our Girl Group chat. It was nice to see Mila already fitting perfectly.

It was nearing 10 o'clock and I was already in bed in my pajamas, face glowing from the night mask I'd put on. My laptop was balanced on my thighs as I went through my camera's SIM card. I was in the middle of editing a picture when my phone buzzed beside me.

Catching sight of the name I instantly answered, putting it on speaker as I pushed my laptop to the side.

"Hey you." Wyatt's voice filtered through the phone, making me smile.

"Hey. Congratulations on the win." Having Wyatt playing like his old self had reignited the team's fire. It was amazing to see. "The Knights looked good today!"

"Thanks. We played pretty well." I could hear him shuffling on the other side of the phone. "Another win definitely gives us a boost."

I settled back against my pillows as he talked about the game. I was more than happy to listen to him. It was like what he'd said to me in the elevator—if you're passionate about something, you should talk about it.

Fortunately, I could listen to him talk about hockey for hours. The passion in his voice made it evident how much he loved what he did. To me, it sounded like he felt like his old self for the first time in a while. The change in him since our meeting in the elevator was clear.

"How was your day?" Wyatt asked after a moment.

"It was good. Busy as usual, but I'm scheduling to meet up with Rick for the food truck article next week."

"Bet he is excited about that."

"He already offered me free food," I laughed.

"Think I can get in on that deal?"

"Hmm I don't know, I think Rick likes me more," I teased.

"I want to disagree, but I think you're right. I've been replaced." He shuffled once more on the other side of the phone. "What are you up to tonight?"

"The girls came over to watch the game, but they left a little while ago. Now I'm just lying in bed going through some photos for work. What about you? Are you going out with the team to celebrate?"

"I'd rather stay in and talk to you." His response made my heart sputter. "Plus, I'm rooming with Trevor, so I'll have the place to myself for a bit."

"All to yourself. What will you do?"

He was quiet for a moment before he answered, his voice low. "Want me to lie or do you want the real answer?"

My thighs pressed together at the change in his voice. That was all it took to turn me on.

"Real."

Wyatt didn't even hesitate to answer. "I'll be laying here thinking about how good your pussy tasted."

My mouth fell open in surprise, my pussy tingling at his words. I don't know what I'd expected him to say, but it wasn't that. My cheeks flushed and I was grateful Wyatt couldn't see me.

"Fuck." I muttered shifting beneath my sheets as the image of him between my thighs came to mind.

The man sure is talented with his tongue.

"Would be better if I was there," he said.

"W-what would you do if you were here?" I asked, swallowing thickly. I wasn't the most confident or experienced when it came to dirty talk, and for some reason, doing it over the phone made me even shyer. But I liked how Wyatt pushed me out of my comfort zone.

"There's a lot I would do if I was there," he said, with a slight

growl in his tone. “I would spend a lot of time between your legs. Teasing, edging.”

Balancing my phone on my chest I snaked my hand slowly down the front of my shirt, fingers playing with the hem of my night shirt above my panties.

Any work I’d focused on before Wyatt called was completely forgotten. Now the only thing on my mind was the sound of Wyatt’s voice and the throbbing between my thighs.

“Would you like my fingers sliding inside you? Feeling how wet you are.”

“Yes,” I said, my breath hitching in my chest, fingertips teasing my clit over my underwear. I could feel how wet I already was, and all Wyatt has done is say a few words.

“I know what you want to do, now tell me how it feels sliding one of those delicate little fingers across your clit.”

My entire face was on fire, yet I did what he said, sliding my hand beneath my underwear. A simple touch of my finger to my clit made me gasp.

“Mmm. I love the noises you make.”

I could hear something through the phone before Wyatt let out a soft groan of his own. The fact he was touching himself had me mirroring his groan, dipping my finger inside me before coming back to my clit.

“You have no idea how hard I am thinking of you.”

I could hear the soft sound of his hand stroking his length. “Wish I was there congratulating you on the win,” I said, hearing the lust and need in my own voice.

I want him here with me.

“Yeah, baby? I can’t think of a better way to celebrate than fucking you.”

I moaned softly at his words. My hips moved against my hand, wanting more.

“Slide a finger in for me,” Wyatt demanded.

I obeyed, sliding two fingers into myself, feeling my pussy tightening around them.

Definitely not as good as Wyatt’s cock that’s for sure.

Moving my fingers, I lowered the phone so that Wyatt could hear how wet I was.

“That’s my girl,” Wyatt encouraged. “Bring your other hand up and pinch those nipples for me.”

“Shit,” I cursed under my breath at the zing of pain that went straight from my nipple through to my very core. It took a moment for my fogged-up brain to grasp what he’d said.

My girl.

Sure, he said it in the moment, but the words made my heart soar. I love the sound of being Wyatt's girl.

"Fuck me, please," I begged.

"I love hearing you beg," Wyatt moaned, the sound of skin slapping echoing through the phone. Knowing he was as turned on as I was, fueled me to finger my pussy faster.

"I need to feel your tight pussy pulsing around my cock," he growled.

I'd never gotten off on phone sex before; always needing more than just 'come for me' or 'suck my cock' to get me there. Yet here I was, fingering my pussy, so wet and turned on, getting closer and closer to coming, all just from Wyatt's voice. My mind went into overdrive, picturing him there with me, watching me fuck myself, telling me how pretty I looked spread out in front of him.

Wyatt's voice drew me closer to the edge. My calves and toes cramped, and my abs tensed as I tried to reach deeper within me. There was no chance of stringing any words together, my entire body focused on one thing.

It was like Wyatt instinctively knew that he continued his coaxing.

"You can do it, baby. Come for me. Come all over those fingers."

I was too far gone to care about how loud I moaned at the sound of my fingers moving in and out of my pussy.

"That's it. That's my girl."

Listening to the sound of him stroking himself, groaning under his breath as he chased his own release, sent me over the edge. I came fiercely, my body trembling as I cried out. My eyes rolled back, my entire body taunt as every nerve ending went haywire. I could barely hear Wyatt coming over the roaring in my ears as I came so hard my thighs shook.

With my fingers still buried deep within me, I slumped back against the pillows breathing heavily. I had no concept of how much time passed before I could open my eyes, and my breathing slowed. I needed to go clean myself up, but I couldn't manage it quite yet.

"Feeling okay?" Wyatt asked after a few moments.

"More than okay," I sighed.

His chuckle made my lips twitch. "How are you feeling?" I asked.

"I'm great." I could hear the smile in his voice. "Though I kind of have a random question."

"Shoot." My voice still a bit breathless.

"How do you feel about toys?"

I paused, unsure if I'd heard him right. "Toys?"

"Mmhmm."

"Uhhh…I mean, I have one," I said shyly, even though I had nothing to be ashamed of. Tons of women had sex toys, and if they

didn’t, they should. But I know some guys don’t like them; i.e.my ex.

“You have one?” Wyatt’s surprise was clear through the phone. “And where was this the other day?”

“I um…I wasn’t sure you’d be okay with it.”

“Babe,” I heard him move before his voice came through more clearly. “I have zero problems using a sex toy. I’ll tell you now, we’re definitely using them.”

And now I’m turned on again.

“You’d better make sure it's charged before I get home tomorrow,” he demanded.

I nodded before remembering he couldn’t see me. “I will.”

“Good girl.”

JOSIE

I'm totally freaking out.

My hands were sweaty and shaky, and I felt like I would throw up at any second. Not the best combination when I was minutes away from meeting Wyatt's family. I desperately wanted to make a good impression on the people Wyatt loved the most. If they didn't like me, they could easily convince Wyatt I wasn't worth the effort.

Clenching the steering wheel until my knuckles turned white, I tried to take some deep breaths.

It's going to be just fine. They're going to like me and everything will be okay.

That was my current mantra, although it did little to ease my nerves.

My phone pinged next to me, and I loosened my grip on the steering wheel slightly. A text from Wyatt flashed across my screen, telling me he was headed in my direction. Giving myself another second to get my nerves under control, I turned my car off. I grabbed my phone and reached across to grab my camera bag off the passenger seat. I figured, why not bring my camera in case there was something worth taking pictures of.

With one last, steadying breath I got out of my car, locking it behind me. Scanning the crowds heading for the stadium, I tried to catch sight of the man who made my heart pound. I was shocked at the amount of people there.

When Wyatt talked about his brother's football game, I'd thought it would be at a regular high school football field, but no. Instead, Wyatt had directed me to one of the Uni's football fields. The parking lot was beyond packed as fans made their way to the entrances, everyone dressed in the team's colors of blue and gray. You'd think everyone was there to see a Uni team play, not a high school team.

A few minutes passed before I spotted a familiar body heading in my direction. With the baseball cap pulled down over his face, it took me a second to recognize Wyatt.

Damn.

I looked him up and down, admiring how he looked in just a simple pair of jeans and shirt matching the rest of the crowds. The

way he returned the gesture made me feel hot all over, flashes of us the other day sprung to mind.

Not sure I'll ever be able to look at him without feeling like I'm going to spontaneously combust.

"Hey," I greeted as soon as he was within earshot.

"Hey, you."

I love how he greets me like that.

He'd barely come to a stop before his hands grabbed my waist, pulling me against his chest. I tilted my head back just in time to meet his lips, the bill of his hat hit my forehead, but I didn't care.

It was like a part of me relaxed whenever I was with him. Like I could let my guard down.

"I'm glad you came," he murmured against my lips. He kissed me twice before pulling away. "Ready to see some kick-ass football?"

I nodded, swallowing thickly as my nerves flared again.

"Hey," Wyatt reached for my hand. "They're going to love you. Trust me." He gave me a reassuring smile and squeezed my hand. Grateful for the assurance, I squeezed his hand back and followed him through the crowd.

"Didn't know so many people would be here," I said after a moment, pressing into his side as a few people shoved past us. Wyatt kept a firm grip on my hand.

"They bring quite a crowd when they play. The team has only lost one game all season, which is a record for the school," Wyatt explained.

Suddenly, I felt a shock of recognition as the colors of those around us sunk in.

As we made our way through security and into the stadium it clicked.

How did I not put two and two together?

If anything, I should be ashamed that I hadn't realized before now.

Wyatt led us through the crowds to our seats, his enormous frame acting like a buffer between us and the crowd. I shouldn't have been surprised that our seats were mere feet away from where the players would be.

My grip on his hand tightened as we came to our row. I glanced across at the two occupied seats, my mouth running dry as I assumed they were Wyatt's mom and brother. Instantly my palms started sweating again.

Why the hell am I so nervous? They're just people. I talk to people all the time for work. You can do this Josie. Just be yourself.

"Hey guys," he greeted. The woman got to her feet, her smile wide and friendly.

"You made it!"

There was no question the woman before me was Wyatt's mom. Her hair was brown just like his and came down to her chin in a stylish bob. It was a little crazy how similar she looked like her son—the same cheek bones, same smile.

His mom pulled him into a hug, but Wyatt kept his hand wrapped in mine as if he knew I needed the contact.

"Mom, this is Josie. Josie, this is my mom, Evelyn," Wyatt introduced us, moving to the side so his mom could see me.

"It's so nice to meet you, Josie."

My hand dropped Wyatt's as his mom pulled me into a hug. I stood there stiffly for a second before hugging her back.

"Nice to meet you, too."

"I'm so glad you could make it." She pulled back with a wide grin, squeezing my arms before stepping back.

Evelyn shuffled to the side as Wyatt's brother stepped forward. Just like with Wyatt, I had to crane my neck to see his face. Though he was a tad shorter than Wyatt, with blond hair and greenish/blue eyes. The beard he wore made him look older, but in an attractive way. The two brothers may have had different hair colors, but the physical resemblance between the two of them was evident.

"Thought you got lost," he said as he and Wyatt did the man handshake thing.

"Aw were you worried about me?" Wyatt shot back with a grin, his brother shaking his head, before he turned to me. "Josie, this is my older brother, Landon."

As Landon's gaze fell upon me, I felt extremely intimidated. There was something about him that made me feel like he was assessing me.

"Nice to meet you, Josie." He stuck his hand out for me to shake. There was a hard look on his face, and I got the impression that he was a bit apprehensive about me.

The feeling's mutual.

I couldn't fully blame him. He's Wyatt's older brother. The guy who practically raised Wyatt and only wanted what was best for him. That included keeping an eye on women who may not have the purest intentions.

"Nice to meet you, too."

"Come have a seat, the game is about to start," Evelyn said, severing the slightly awkward moment between Landon and me. She gestured for me to sit next to her and Wyatt sat on my other side.

"How was Mateo this morning?" Wyatt asked, leaning around me to look at his mom.

"His usual ball of energy," Wyatt's mom said with a wave of her hand. "He was out the door an hour before he had to meet with the team."

Hearing the name, I felt even more like an idiot. I really should have put two and two together sooner. All my attention had been on Wyatt that I hadn't even thought about his younger brothers name.

"Bet he didn't sleep much."

"He pulled a Wyatt," Landon butted in.

"Pulled a Wyatt?" I looked at Landon, curious as to what he meant.

"When Wyatt was younger, he used to pace up and down the halls the night before a game. Would even take out his hockey stick and practice shots, mumbling plays until midnight." Landon explained.

"Wore a path in the carpet," Evelyn nodded in agreement. "The last time I checked in on him, Mateo had a football in hand, pacing," she added.

I found it adorable that Wyatt's little brother did the same thing before a game. "Has he always wanted to play football?" I asked.

"He's played almost every sport there is. If I thought these two were full-on as boys," Evelyn gestured to Wyatt and Landon. "Mateo's double that. The kid's always on the go."

"Not into hockey as much?" I asked.

"He likes it," Wyatt answered. "But football is his favorite. As soon as he held a football something just clicked."

I loved that they all supported Mateo and his sport. Just like they did with Wyatt.

A moment later a loud voice came over the speakers, echoing through the stands and a wave of anticipation swept through the crowd.

The teams were getting ready to come out onto the field.

The excitement rose around us as the announcer called out the opposing team. Family and students from their school cheered as the football team ran out onto the field. I was impressed to see there were just as many supporters present for the other team as there were for the home team.

I smiled to myself as I realized this would be my first time seeing Wyatt on the other side of a game. I was curious to see what he was like as a fan.

With Mateo's team, *The Greyhounds,* set to come out I grabbed my camera and turned it on. As the crowd stood to greet the team, I started snapping pictures of the players running onto the field.

The same team I took pictures of just a few weeks ago—the same day I met Wyatt.

Cheers echoed around me as I snapped picture after picture. When the team got closer to us, I searched for *Boone* on the back of a jersey.

Finding Mateo jogging towards us, I zoomed in, taking a picture. Beside me, Wyatt and Landon let out ear piercing whistles. We were close enough to the team that I saw Mateo's helmet head snap up

towards our section. I didn't have to see his face to know he was smiling.

The sight of Wyatt's family cheering Mateo on made my chest a little tight. I'd always wanted a family to cheer me on at my track-meets, to be the loudest ones there, even if it was embarrassing. My dad came to a few in high school—he did the best he could, between work and then being sick. In Uni he made it to one meet before I tore my ACL, and it was all over.

The truth is, everyone wants someone to cheer for them, regardless of what it was for. There's no worse feeling than looking over a crowd and not seeing someone there rooting for you.

I continued taking pictures of the team. Shots of them all huddled together as the coach talked, of them mid-chant before they dispersed to do warm up before the game, shots of the coach watching them intently.

"Are you a photographer, Josie?" Evelyn asked, gesturing to the camera in my hand as we sat back down.

"Sort of. I work for *Fusion Weekly* magazine."

"I've heard—"

"So, you're a reporter," Landon leaned forward, interrupting his mom, his eyes narrowed as he looked from me to my camera and back again.

"Landon," Wyatt said, his voice low and full of warning. "She isn't a reporter."

"Then why is she taking pictures?" Landon looked back at me with a raised eyebrow.

I had a feeling whatever I said would affect how he looked at me. "The magazine I work for only highlights businesses or events t in Toronto. Nothing to do with the paparazzi," I explained, needing him and their mom to know I wasn't some reporter trying to cozy up to Wyatt, only to use him.

"A few weeks ago, I actually took pictures of Mateo's team for the magazine."

This time all three heads turned in my direction. "We did a piece on their success at making it to the championship."

When Landon glared, I immediately regretted the confession.

"So, you knew about Mateo beforehand," Landon demanded, the accusation in his voice making my mouth dry as I struggled to try to answer him.

"No. I didn't know he was Wyatt's brother until five minutes ago." I looked at Wyatt, silently pleading that he believed me. "It was the same night we got stuck in the elevator together—I told you about the assignment."

"The team that hit on you," Wyatt replied, realization in his eyes.

I nodded. “Mateo was nice enough to answer some questions about the team and that was it. I had no clue his last name was Boone. I didn’t even ask at the time.”

“I believe you,” Wyatt said, placing his hand on my thigh, giving it a reassuring squeeze.

“I can delete the photos, if you want.” And I meant it. I’d delete all pictures if Wyatt asked, without hesitation.

“You don’t need to,” Evelyn spoke up, flashing me a kind smile. “Excuse my son, he sometimes speaks before he thinks.” She turned to Landon, with a look only a mother could give.

Despite her words, I felt like I’d gotten on the wrong side of Landon.

“Hey,” Wyatt said softly, and I turned to look at him. “It’s okay, I’m not mad.”

“You probably think—”

Wyatt shook his head, cutting me off.

“You have no ill intentions, and like you said, you told me about it in the elevator. Neither of us put it together.” He said with a casual shrug.

“I should have clicked when you first told me your brother's name.” I shook my head.

“There’s a lot of Mateo’s in the world, you couldn’t have known.” He gave me a reassuring smile and took my hand. “I promise, it’s okay.”

Before I could say anything else, the whistle blew, signaling the start of the game. Though I didn’t miss the glare Wyatt shot at his older brother.

JOSIE

The Greyhounds won 56-11, absolutely annihilating the other team. No wonder they'd only lost one game all season and made it to the championship. Mateo was one hell of a quarterback, and there was no doubt in my mind he would become a big name one day. If he played this well at 17, what would he be like in a few years?

Just like his big brother, Mateo put it all out there on the field. I could see the same competitiveness in him that I saw in Wyatt when he played. It was clear as day that Mateo was Wyatt's brother, that's for sure.

"That was a great game," I said as the four of us stood to the left of the stadium in the parking lot, waiting for Mateo to come out of the locker room. "Wasn't expecting a high school football game to be so exciting." I beamed up at Wyatt.

"Think you'll become a football fan now?"

"Maybe I'll ditch hockey for football."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, hockey is so old news."

Wyatt reached for my waist, tickling me as I squirmed, laughing.

As I noticed Evelyn watching the two of us, I felt a little embarrassed. But then she smiled at me, a little twinkle in her eye, and I felt at ease. Though it was short-lived as Landon stepped forward, engaging Wyatt in a stare off, like they were having a silent conversation.

Thankfully, at that moment, Evelyn caught sight of Mateo, and called out to him. She wasted no time in rushing over to greet him.

"Oh baby, you did so great!" Evelyn pulled him into a tight hug.

I held back a laugh at the helpless look he sent Wyatt and Landon. Pulling back Evelyn planted kisses on his face. This time I couldn't help myself as I laughed into my hand at the disgusted look on his face, his nose scrunched up.

"Ew, mom." Mateo pulled out of her hold and wiped at his face, but I saw the look of love in his eyes when he smiled at his mom.

"Good job, punk." Landon stepped forward and ruffled his hair, the harshness he'd held in his expression now gone.

"Knew you'd kill it." Wyatt pulled his little brother into a tight

hug. A look of pride washed over Mateo's face at his brother's praises. It was clear their opinions meant a lot to him.

When Wyatt finally let him go and stepped back, Mateo's eyes landed on mine.

"You!" he exclaimed. "You're the girl who took pictures of the team a few weeks ago."

"I did," I nodded, giving him a small smile.

"So you are…" He looked between Wyatt and I before a mischievous smile took over his face. "You're the girl who has Wyatt all tongue tied."

Could have sworn the tips of Wyatt's ears turned pink at his brother's words.

"Don't listen to him."

"Wait. So that means I met your girl first." Mateo teased.

"Don't even think about finishing that sentence," Wyatt threatened, eyes narrowing at his little brother. I bit my lower lip to keep from laughing, sensing from Mateo's mischievous expression that he was eager to antagonize his brother.

"Isn't it the first person who sees her, gets her?" Mateo winked at me, and I couldn't help it, I laughed. "Feel free to ditch my brother and hook up with me instead."

"In your dreams," Wyatt scoffed.

"You mean in *her* dreams." Mateo retorted, wiggling his eyebrows up and down at me. It was plain to see that he was the typical baby of the family that loved messing with his older brothers. I already loved him. Especially when he shot me another wink, and Wyatt took a cautionary step towards him.

"Joking, joking." Mateo raised his hands taking a step backwards. "Unless Josie wants a real man." Just like that, Mateo dropped his bag and took off, Wyatt right on his heels.

"Wow, you're getting as slow as Landon," Mateo shot over his shoulder as he ran past.

"What did you just say?" Landon took a step forward.

"Nothing…grandpa." Mateo got the exact reaction that he wanted, as Landon took his turn to chase after his brother. I watched as the three of them ran around the parking lot. Two grown men and a teenager, running around like kids.

It showed me a whole new side to Wyatt. It was like the moment he was around his family, the mask completely fell away, revealing a loving, funny, goofy guy. Watching him chase Mateo around the parking lot, exchanging jibes with both his brothers, you'd never know he was one of the world's most sought-after hockey players.

Right now, he wasn't Wyatt Boone, hockey star. He was Wyatt Boone, big brother.

And I was so there for it.

Hell, even Landon looked years younger as he joined in. Their brotherly bond seemed untouchable.

“Josie, I’m sorry about my sons,” Evelyn apologized as she stepped up beside me. “I’d love to tell you that they’re not normally like this, but I’d be lying.” I glanced at her, admiring her loving expression as she watched her kids act like five-year-olds.

I felt my chest tighten at their connection. The way they were with each other made me miss my dad—daily phone calls to check in, the weekend dinners and hockey games we watched together. It also made me miss the fact that I’d never had a mom like Evelyn. I didn’t have a motherly figure in my life at all. The person I could go to and talk about boys with, someone to comfort me when I got my first period at thirteen, or who would do my hair for the prom.

Yes, I had my dad, and he was the best dad in the world, but there was only so much he could do. He tried his very best, raising a daughter alone, and I never once felt unloved. He was my best friend —yet a part of me always wished for a mom.

“It’s okay,” I waved her off. “I always wanted a sibling growing up. Someone to tease and chase around a parking lot.” We laughed together as Wyatt and Landon narrowly missed running into each other. Wyatt might be an amazing hockey player, but it was clear Mateo was faster, thanks to football.

“So, you’re an only child?” Evelyn asked. Her question was innocent enough, and yet I felt the hot sting of tears.

“Yeah, my mom left us when I was only three, so it was just me and my dad before he passed.”

“Oh hon, I’m sorry.” Evelyn softly squeezed my arm. I looked away so I couldn’t see the sympathy in her eyes, knowing it would be my undoing, and the last thing I wanted to do was cry in front of her, considering we’d just met. “The boy's father walked out on us when Landon was 11 and Wyatt was 8. Mateo was only a month old, so he doesn’t remember him,” Evelyn said after a moment, her hand still on my arm.

Wyatt had briefly talked about the absence of his dad as he grew up, and that Landon helped raise him, but he hadn’t said much else on the subject. Not that I’d pushed.

“I’m sorry. That couldn’t have been easy.”

“I wouldn’t have changed it though. I got three beautiful boys out of it.” The love for her boys was evident in her voice. Wyatt and Landon came to a stop before us, breathing hard as Mateo ran towards Evelyn. “Three very immature boys at that,” she said wryly.

“I think the two of you need to hit the gym more. I’m embarrassing you in front of Josie,” Mateo taunted, hovering behind Evelyn as if she

was his shield.

I bit my lip to hide my smile.

Yeah, I already like Mateo.

Evelyn sighed before turning around to face Mateo. “You’re going out to celebrate with the team, right?” Mateo nodded. “I want you home by midnight and if you need anything, call me. I mean it Mateo.” Evelyn said firmly.

“I promise,” he said, although I don’t think any of us missed the twinkle in his eye. Mateo was pure trouble, that’s for sure.

“If you need a ride, call me,” Landon butted in as he moved beside Mateo, squeezing his shoulder hard enough that I saw Mateo wince. “Even just a sip of alcohol, you call me.”

“Ow, yes, geez, I will.” Mateo wiggled out from under Landon’s hold. Even Wyatt gave his younger brother a look that made Mateo roll his eyes. “I’m a responsible adult.”

Both Wyatt and Landon snorted at that.

“We are all so proud of you.” Evelyn grabbed Mateo once more and pulled him into a tight hug. I watched as Wyatt and Landon joined in and wanting them to have something to remember today by, I took a few steps back.

“Before you go, I need you guys to stand together,” I instructed. I knew for a fact Evelyn would want this moment captured. “Picture time.”

“Wonderful!” Evelyn beamed, linking her arm with Mateo and Landon’s, pulling each in close. Smiling, I brought my camera up, signaling for Wyatt to get closer, ignoring the ‘are you kidding me looks’ both he and Landon shot me.

“Say cheese.” With a wide smile, I focused the lens on everyone in the frame and snapped some pictures. “Perfect.”

Looking down at my camera, I smiled softly at the picture. Evelyn stood front and center with Landon right behind her, flanked by Mateo and Wyatt on other sides. Despite the looks they first gave me, all three boys beamed at the camera. I swear the entire family was blessed with good genes.

“So, gorgeous,” Mateo came up and draped his arm around my shoulders as I looked at the picture. Mateo was almost as tall as his other brothers, making me tilt my head back to look at him. “As I was saying, my brother doesn’t really know how to treat a lady, so feel free to come to me when you get bored of him.

“Yeah? Think you can handle a grown woman?” I countered, raising an eyebrow at him.

“Oh babe, I—” He started to say only to be stopped by an arm wrapping around his neck, tugging him away from me.

“You really are asking for it.” Wyatt kept his brother in a headlock.

“Keep your hands off my girl.”

My cheeks flamed but my heart stuttered at his words.

My girl. I like the sound of that.

At the sound of a loud whistle, we all turned towards the exit where a group of Mateo’s teammates stood, waving him over. He pulled out of Wyatt’s hold.

“Gotta go.” Glancing back at me, Mateo shot me a wide smile. “Nice seeing you again Josie.”

“You too. Congrats on the win.”

He flashed us a smile, walking backwards.

His smile is exactly like Wyatt’s.

“See ya later!” With that he turned and ran towards his friends, all of them cheering.

“Would the two of you like to grab dinner with us?” Evelyn asked after a moment. I hesitated, not sure what to say, but thankfully Wyatt jumped in.

“Sorry Ma, we actually have plans.” He draped his arm around my shoulder, drawing me into his side. I looked up at him, wondering what plans he was talking about, but said nothing.

“Next time.” She gave us a kind smile. “Come by the house any time Josie, you’re more than welcome.” Once again, she pulled me into a hug, only this time, I returned it instantly. Saying goodbye to Landon was a little more awkward, but at least he’d stopped glaring at me.

Baby steps.

I waved to Evelyn over my shoulder as Wyatt pulled me in the direction of my car.

“Why such a rush?” I questioned. “Didn’t want to have dinner with your mom?”

“No.”

“No?”

“What I have planned for you is not family friendly. Plus, I’m not hungry for food,” he gave me a wicked grin over his shoulder.

WYATT

Josie: See you tonight.

I smiled at the heart emoji Josie sent, her profile picture smiling back at me. I took it the other day as she lay on my couch, clad in one of my sweatshirts, smiling over at me. Her hair was pulled into a messy bun and her face clear of makeup, leaving her cute freckles on display. She looked downright beautiful.

We had a date tonight and I planned on finally asking her to be my girlfriend. I'd wanted to ask her sooner, but a part of me was nervous she would say no. I knew her past relationships hadn't been the greatest and I didn't want to push her. If she wanted to keep things how they were, I would do that, even if I wanted to make her mine in every way possible.

Before I could do that, I had to take care of something first.

Pocketing my phone, I opened the door to my brother's ice rink, *Hockey Haven*. My footsteps echoed as I walked through the lobby. Cases lined both sides of the walls, filled with pictures and trophies. A mix of Landon's trophies ranging from when he was a kid, right through to uni, and some from the past teams that played at the rink before he bought it. There were even a couple from the last two years of little and junior league Landon started up.

The chilly air from the ice hit me as soon as I stepped through the double set of doors. The sound of skates on the ice made me smile. Coming to the ice rink always felt like coming home. There'd always been something soothing about the rink, long before Landon bought the place.

It was mid-afternoon on a Thursday, so it was no surprise that the rink was half-full with kids. By the looks of it, the Junior hockey league was warming up for practice. I knew they caught sight of me when the whispers started. I gave them a little wave as I passed, enjoying their excited gasps.

As they chatted animatedly in my wake, I made a mental note to come back and say hello to them once I'd finished talking to Landon.

Stopping in the doorway of Landon's office, I found him typing something on his computer. I knocked on the door frame and walked

in.

"Hey."

"Wy." Landon looked up, surprised to see me. "Didn't know you were going to drop by. Is everything okay?"

"Things are fine," I said as I took a seat in front of his desk.

Typical Landon, immediately thinking something was wrong. He's been a father figure my entire life, always there to fix anything no matter what it was.

I wasn't entirely sure how to go about this. I love my brother, he's honestly one of the best people I know, but his treatment of Josie at Mateo's game was uncalled for.

Knowing it was better to rip it off like a Band-Aid, I braced my forearms on my knees.

"About Mateo's football game."

Across from me Landon leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, watching me intently.

"What you said to Josie was uncalled for. She didn't deserve it." I held his gaze as I spoke.

Josie may not officially be my girlfriend yet, but like hell I would let someone talk to her like that, even if it was my brother.

"Are you sure she isn't a reporter?" The look he gave me said he didn't buy it. "We've been through this before."

"Josie is not Lacey," I snapped.

"That's what you thought about Lacey until she turned around and wrote an article about your *'relationship'* and sold it to every news outlet."

"That was six years ago," I said through gritted teeth. "No one even gave a shit about what she said."

"Because your agent steered your PR to bury it," Landon said as he leaned his arms on his desk. "Who's to say Josie won't do the same to you? You're finally getting your game back."

"What is your problem with her?" Now I was starting to get pissed. He was comparing an old fling—it wasn't even a relationship—to Josie. Lacey was a mistake I'd never make again, and I knew for an absolute fact Josie wouldn't do what she did to me.

"I'm trying to protect you."

"Well stop!" I yelled. Remembering there were kids just outside the door, I took a breath before lowering my voice. "I don't need you to protect me from things anymore. I'm not a kid, Landon."

I saw the flash of hurt in his eyes, though he tried to hide it.

Fuck.

I hadn't meant for it to come out that harsh. I knew Landon was trying to look out for me.

I'll forever appreciate everything he's done for me, nor could I

repay him for giving up his childhood so I could have one. But he also needed to learn I wasn't ten anymore. Yes, I'd made mistakes in the past with women, but Josie was not one of them.

"Lan," I sighed. "I know you just want to protect me, and I love you for it. I do. But I'm falling for Josie, and you need to accept that."

Landon was quiet for a moment before he spoke again. "You're falling for her?"

It was the first time I'd admitted it out loud.

I was falling for her.

Faster than I ever thought possible, but every day I spent time with her, I found myself wanting more. More of her smiles, her laugh, the way her nose scrunched up when she was thinking. I wanted to wake up every morning, knowing was in bed beside me.

Was it fast? Fuck yes, but I didn't care. Not when I finally felt like I'd met my person.

"I am. I'm asking her to be my girlfriend tonight."

Landon leaned back in his chair with a soft sigh. "I'm sorry for how I acted. I just want what's best for you."

My anger dissipated at his words. Getting an apology from Landon was rare, even if I was his brother. He didn't mince words and stood by what he said most of the time.

"I know you do." That's all he's ever wanted for me, and I appreciated it more than he knew. "But I need you to know Josie's not going anywhere. So what happened on Saturday can't happen again."

"As long as she makes you happy, I'll be supportive."

"Thank you." Having Landon's support meant a lot to me.

"You should bring her to Mateo's birthday party next weekend. He'd love that."

"I bet he would," I shook my head while Landon smirked.

"You know Mateo. He loves to push your buttons."

"He's going to get his ass beat," I grumbled. I knew Mateo thought flirting with Josie was funny, but the thought of anyone flirting with her didn't sit well with me. Even if it was my brother doing it jokingly.

Hearing the chatter of kids grow in volume, I stood up and followed Landon out of his office to the ice, all of the kids staring at us.

"Have anything going on for the next hour?" he asked, looking from the kids to me.

I smiled at the kids, knowing I had a few hours free before I saw Josie. "I'm free."

HOLDING A SMALL BOUQUET OF LILIES, I knocked on Josie's door. I was a tad early, but I wanted to see her. Two days without her was too long, but between her job and my hockey, we'd both been too busy. I was eager to see her, despite the butterflies in my stomach knowing what I planned to ask her.

When she opened the door, my breath caught in my throat.

She looks absolutely stunning.

Josie wore a deep green dress with a single strap over her shoulder, a ruched waist and a long slit showing a hint of her long legs. Her brown hair was pulled into a ponytail, the ends curled with a few tendrils framing her face.

"Wow."

"Hey." Her cheeks were slightly pink which just made her even cuter.

"You look amazing," I breathed, my eyes following the line of the dress from her shoulders down to her feet.

"It's not too much?" she asked, her hands fiddling with her dress.

"Not at all." I shook my head and extended the flowers towards her. "These are for you."

"They're beautiful." She brought them up to her nose and smiled, her brown eyes sparkling. I never knew brown eyes could be so beautiful until I saw Josie's.

"Thank you."

"Ready to go?" I smiled in return.

"Let me put these in some water and grab my purse."

I slipped through the door behind her, shutting it as I watched her walk away. I was still trying to wrap my head around the fact that hopefully I could soon call her mine. I'm beyond whipped but I don't even care.

After a few minutes, Josie returned with her purse. "Ready."

With a soft smile, I extended my hand. As her fingers slipped through mine, it felt like they were meant to be there. Unable to help myself, I bent down and kissed her, not caring if her lipstick transferred to me.

When she looked up at me with a wide smile, I knew I was done for when it came to Josie.

"RESERVATION UNDER BOONE," I said to the hostess as she greeted us. For a night like tonight, I wanted to take Josie somewhere special. This was one of the best Italian places in Toronto. A little higher class than what either of us were used to. Sure, I could afford to eat out at all the fanciest restaurants in the city, but that just wasn't me. I'd rather eat at Rick's, but tonight I wanted to treat Josie to the best.

I felt uncomfortable as the hostess stared at me, though I tried my best to ignore it. I'd seen that look on many women when they talk to me, like they were trying to mentally undress me. Maybe a few years ago I would have liked the attention, but not anymore. Especially not when I had Josie by my side.

I tugged her closer to my side as the hostess grabbed two menus. I could feel dozens of eyes on us as we walked through the restaurant to a table in the corner.

So much for a romantic, private dinner.

I'd gotten used to the attention over the years, but Josie hadn't had the chance. The last thing I wanted was to throw her in with the wolves. Reaching the table, I pulled out Josie's chair before sliding into the one next to her.

"Well, aren't you popular?" Josie said after the hostess gave us our menus, purposefully lingering longer than necessary. "Does it get annoying at times?" I watched her glance around at the people seated around us, most not even trying to hide that they were staring.

"Yeah, it can be a lot. Some people don't understand personal space." I wanted her to know that despite all the stares, I was fully focused on her tonight. "But none of it matters because I'm here with you." I grabbed her hand and brought it to my lips.

"That was cheesy," Josie said but her voice was a little breathless. I smiled against her hand before putting it back on the table. Grabbing the menu with one hand I rested my left on her thigh.

Almost immediately, our waiter appeared at our table. I ordered us a bottle of wine while the two of us looked over the menu. Josie was quiet, her eyes darting over the menu and then around us. The stares had subsided a little, but a few lingered.

When the waiter came back with our wine, I saw Josie hesitantly reach for it. I could tell she was uncomfortable being here. Maybe it was the atmosphere, that you had to be well off to afford this place, or all the stares, but regardless, she wasn't having a good time.

Seeing her tug her bottom lip between her teeth as she looked at the menu, I knew I'd made a mistake bringing her there.

This isn't us.

"Let's get out of here," I said, grabbing my wallet and putting down a hundred-dollar bill. Standing, I reached for her hand.

"We just got here."

“Not really in the mood for Italian.” With her hand in mine, I gently led her back through the restaurant. Eyes once again on us.

I ignored the hostess calling after us and walked out of the restaurant. As we walked down the street towards the car, Josie pulled me to a stop.

“We didn’t have to leave.” I could see and feel the guilt coming off her. “I was okay to stay.”

“It’s not worth it if you are uncomfortable.” And I meant it. “I know a better place we can go.”

“Better than one of the top-rated Italian restaurants in the city?”

“You can count on it,” I grinned.

WYATT

"Pizza?" Josie looked at the pizza parlor with a raised eyebrow. "That's Italian."

"Yeah, but the pizza's they make are out of this world."

Josie ducked under my arm as I held the door open. The two of us were highly over dressed for this place, and we stuck out like a pair of sore thumbs. It was a hole-in-the-wall type of pizza place that'd been around for years.

The bartender looked up and raised his hand in greeting. I gave a nod back as I led Josie towards a booth along the far side of the wall. The place wasn't that busy for a Thursday night, and the few people there were too busy doing their own thing to pay us any attention.

From the outside, it was deceptively small, but as soon as you walked inside, you were met with an immense space. A massive bar lined one entire side, with booths along the opposite wall. The center of the room was peppered with a mismatched array of tables and chairs that added to the eccentric vibe of the place. The owner prided himself on his quirky, thrifted decor, and the place had become almost as well known for that as it had its pizzas.

"How have I never heard of this place?" Josie asked, looking around as we slid into the booth.

"It's more of a local hotspot. Landon, Mateo and I have come here for years." In fact, it was our ritual to eat there at least once a month.

"So they have the best pizza, huh?"

"Hands down. What's your go to pizza?" I asked, not even bothering to look at the menu that sat on the table.

"I'm a simple gal. Pepperoni and pineapple."

"Wow." I shook my head. "I'm disappointed in you."

"Excuse me? Pineapple belongs on pizza."

"Does not."

"You're just uncultured."

"The best is pepperoni, peppers and onions."

"Nope."

"Let's put it to the test then. One of each and then we decide who has the best taste," I challenged.

Josie rested arms on the table and smirked. "Game on."

"JUST PUT IT IN."

"No."

"Come on, open wide," Josie said, holding out a slice of pepperoni and pineapple pizza towards me. When she gave me those puppy-dog eyes, I couldn't say no. So reluctantly, I leaned forward and took a bite of the pizza. Josie watched with an excited grin as she waited for my reaction.

It wasn't bad, better than I thought it would be. Still not my favorite pizza, but it wasn't the worst.

"So?"

"It's good."

"Told ya," Josie grinned in triumph. She took a big bite of the same slice and gave a content moan. I just smiled and shook my head, eating my own pizza.

Seeing her smile and joke made me glad we left the last restaurant. This felt a lot more like us. There was a good chance I'd regret eating the pizza during tomorrow's practice, but it was worth it to watch Josie enjoy herself.

As we sat there talking, I figured now was the best time to ask her. My palms grew sweaty as I shifted in my seat.

God, I can't remember the last time I was so nervous. Not even playing in the Cup Championship made me this nervous.

When there was a slight pause in conversation, I straightened, clearing my throat.

"There's something I wanted to ask you."

Just say it.

"Oh?" she asked, lowering her pizza to her plate to give me her undivided attention.

"I…" Mentally, I slapped myself.

Since when do I get flustered by a girl? If Trevor and Bryton were here right now, they'd be laughing their asses off. Hell, even my own brothers would too.

"I know it's only been a few weeks since we got stuck in that elevator together. We haven't known each other long—not really," I was rambling, but I couldn't stop. "But it feels like I've known you a lot longer than that, which is crazy because I've never felt that way before." I took a deep breath. "What I'm trying to say is…will you be my girlfriend?"

Josie sat perfectly still; her eyes wide.

"You don't have to say yes," I quickly added.

Maybe I read this completely wrong, and she didn't want something more.

"We can stay how we are. I don't want to pressure you to say yes. That is, not unless you want to."

Wyatt, get a damn grip!

"Are you sure you want me?" Josie asked so quietly. I almost didn't hear her.

"Of course I want you." I reached across the table and took her hand. "I've wanted you from the moment I met you in that elevator."

"I just don't want you to change your mind later on."

I wanted nothing more than to find her ex and hurt him for what he'd done to Josie. The bastard tore her down so badly that she didn't realize her own worth. If anyone was unworthy in this relationship, it was *me*.

"Josie," I said softly, squeezing her hand as she slowly looked up at me. "I will *never* change my mind about you, and I will spend every day showing you that. If you'd let me." And I would. I would spend every waking second showing Josie just how much she meant to me.

She didn't say anything for a moment, and I felt my hope settle like a weight in the pit of my stomach. But then, she nodded.

"Is that a yes?" I asked, cautiously.

"Yes."

My smile was so wide that I felt like my face was about to split in half. I didn't care that I must have looked like a maniac as I slipped out of my side of the booth and slid in beside her. Grabbing her face, I kissed her like she was the last drop of water on earth.

After a few moments, we pulled back, breathing heavy, our foreheads pressed together.

"Want to get out of here?" I asked.

Josie nodded; her hands fisted in my shirt.

Thankfully we'd eaten most of our pizza, and I threw some money on the table as I pulled Josie from the booth. With her fingers weaved through mine, we all but ran from the restaurant to the car.

The ride back to the apartment seemed to take ages. It didn't help that there was traffic, but the need to take Josie was almost overwhelming. So much so, that my hand slipped between the slit in her dress and slid between her thighs, my fingertips grazing her underwear.

Keeping my eyes on the road, I traced her clit with my fingers, the fabric growing wet under my touch. Josie shifted in the seat, spreading her legs wider, the dress falling away, exposing her legs.

I purposely kept my touch light, teasing her as I drove. Her soft little pants filled the car, making me grow hard. As I applied a little more pressure, Josie moaned, her hips angling to increase the

pressure.

As we turned into the parking lot, I withdrew my hand, a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth as she let out a frustrated groan. Josie all but jumped out of the car as soon as I turned it off, grabbing my hand and tugging me after her.

The doorman greeted us but all I could manage was a nod as the two of us hurried for the elevators. Thankfully we didn't have to wait long and no one else got in with us.

As soon as the doors closed, I pushed Josie against the back wall, my hands gripping the railing by her waist, caging her between the wall and my hips.

"You've taunted me in this damn dress all night." I lowered my head, trailing my nose down the side of her jaw to her neck. "I've wanted nothing more than to bend you over and see what's under it."

I pressed my lips to the side of her neck, a spot I'd learned was one of her sensitive spots. Josie's breath hitched in her chest as I gently nipped at her skin before moving my mouth downwards to her collarbones. Her hands gripped the back of my shirt, bunching the fabric in her fists.

"Maybe we should stop this elevator and spend the entire night here again," I murmured.

"Maybe we should," she breathed, pushing herself against me.

I kissed down her bare shoulder, until the *bing* of the elevator alerted us that we reached her floor.

With my patience rapidly dwindling, I yanked Josie out of the elevator to her apartment. It took her a second to unlock the door, the fact I stood behind her, nibbling her neck didn't help.

We finally stumbled into her apartment, a mess of limbs. Josie grabbed the front of my shirt and pushed my back against the door. The two of us pawed at each other's clothes. I unzipped her dress and threw it in one direction, my shirt and pants following seconds later.

My blood felt like it was on fire as Josie stood before me clad in only a pair of red panties.

God she's perfect.

She was mine now, and I needed to make it real by being inside of her.

I grabbed her waist and walked her backwards towards her couch. In one motion I flipped her around until she was bent over the back of it, her perfect ass sticking up in the air. She still had her heels on which made her ass and legs look even better.

"Fuck," I groaned at the sight. Bringing my hand up, I slapped one of her cheeks. Josie gasped but arched her back even more. I was worried I was too rough with her, but everything I gave Josie took.

With each slap on her ass, she moaned, the wet spot on her

underwear let me know she was enjoying this as much as I was. Once her ass was a cute shade of pink, I grabbed her thong and pulled it down, letting it fall to her heels.

With my foot I nudged her feet further apart. Again, I groaned at the sight before me.

All mine.

"Wyatt," Josie moaned as my fingers grazed her pussy.

"Tell me what you want, Josie."

"I need you."

"I'm happy you need me, but that's not what I asked." I *tsked*. Grabbing her ponytail, I yanked her head back. "I asked. What. Do. You. Want?"

I knew dirty talk was new for her. Her cheeks turn pink whenever she tried to say something dirty in return. I loved seeing her slowly come out of her shell and embrace a side to her she'd kept hidden. A side I fully planned on bringing out further.

Wanting to help her out, I slide two fingers inside of her, her pussy instantly clenching around them. Slowly I moved them in and out as she let out little noises.

"I want you to fuck me," Josie finally said, her voice breathless and filled with need. "Please."

"God, I love when you beg." I slipped my fingers out of her so I could take off my boxers, kicking them to the side. Grabbing her hair once more, I wrapped it around my fist while my other hand lined my cock up to her pussy.

I rubbed her wetness all over the tip, tapping her clit with it. The way she moaned my name was a sound I wanted tattooed in my skin.

Tired of teasing, I slid my entire length in her in one go, our moans of pleasure filling her apartment. As I buried myself deep in Josie, I felt my entire world tilt on its axis.

Pretty sure I'm way past the point of falling for Josie.

JOSIE

"Since I just turned 18, are you ready for that date?"

An arm draped over my shoulders as I stepped out into Evelyn's backyard. I glanced up at Mateo who smirked down at me.

"Depends what you have in mind. Go carts may be too much for you, want to try bumper cars?"

"I don't mind sharing a bumper car with you. I'll even let you sit on my lap." Mateo winked.

"Just tell me when," I played along, a group of Mateo's friends standing nearby, listening in on our conversation. I slipped out from under his arm with a wink and headed towards Evelyn and Mila.

I'd only briefly known Mateo, but I already liked him. In a way he was the younger brother I always wanted growing up. Someone to joke around and be goofy with. It helped that Mateo had an infectious personality that you couldn't help but love.

"I'm so glad you girls could make it," Evelyn said as I reached them.

"Of course. Couldn't miss Mateo's birthday," I said as I gave her a hug.

Mila smiled. "Plus, you don't want to pass up on Evelyn's homemade chocolate cake."

"So I've heard!" I replied.

During the entire ride over, Wyatt talked nonstop about his mom's chocolate cake, telling me it would be an orgasm in my mouth. His exact words. Apparently, Evelyn was known for this cake and made it at every celebration. Now with Mila backing Wyatt's claims, I was curious to try it for myself.

"Wyatt talked about it the whole way here," I said.

"Bryton did too," Mila laughed.

"Speaking of my son, where is he?" Evelyn asked, looking around the backyard.

"He went inside when we arrived," I said, and as soon as I spoke her eyes widened.

"Oh, he'd better not be." Without another word Evelyn took off for the house. Mila and I exchanged bewildered looks before following her.

Evelyn was a step ahead of us as she strode into the kitchen, only to pause mid-step. Peaking around her, I clamped a hand on my mouth to stifle my laughter. Leaning over the kitchen counter were four grown-ass men caught with forks half-raised to their mouths. Sitting in front of them lay a half-eaten chocolate cake.

Wyatt, Landon, Trevor and Bryton stared at us, like little kids caught with their hands in the cookie jar, their eyes wide.

Oh, this is priceless. And that's my boyfriend right there, with a mouthful of cake.

"Is anyone going to explain?" Evelyn crossed her arms and waited. Beside me Mila tried to stifle her own laughter at the scared look that passed over all their faces. They clearly didn't expect to be caught red handed.

As Trevor pulled the fork from his mouth and slowly brought it back down to the cake, I snorted, barely containing my laughter as I gripped Mila's arm. When Evelyn stepped forward, I almost lost it as all four flinched.

"You are grown men."

Wyatt and Bryton glanced over at Mila and I, pleading looks on their faces as though they thought we could come to their rescue. We shook our heads in unison—we were having too much fun watching this unfold.

"Sorry," Bryton mumbled around a mouthful of cake.

Evelyn stared at them for another second before she sighed and shook her head. "You four are lucky I made multiple cakes. But if I see any of you touching the others, I don't care if you are adults, I will ground you." While it was comical that Evelyn was threatening to ground four grown ass men, you could tell she was beyond serious. The tone in her voice left no room for argument.

"Now all of you, out to the backyard so we can celebrate Mateo's birthday." Evelyn turned and walked out of the kitchen mumbling about how these boys were going to be the death of her. As soon as she was out of ear shot Mila and I started cackling uncontrollably.

"Thought she was going to beat our asses there for a minute," Bryton finally spoke.

"I know, right?" Trevor added as he quickly picked up his fork and scooped up another bite.

"What are you doing, dickhead? Didn't you hear what mom said?" Wyatt smacked the back of Trevor's head.

"What? She has back-up's and this one's already ruined. May as well take another bite." To further his point, he dug into the cake again, quickly followed by the others.

"Wow, hiding out and eating cake, I think you've hit a new low," I chastised once I'd gotten my laughter under control.

“I can feel the judgment,” he said wryly, cocking an eyebrow at me.

“Oh, I definitely am. And on your brother's birthday,” I glanced over at Landon with my best disappointed expression. “You two are his big brothers.”

“Hey, that little shit would have done the same,” Landon said, pointing his fork at me as Wyatt nodded his agreement. I just grinned.

It was nice being around Landon when he wasn’t being his intimating self. When Wyatt and I first arrived, he’d surprised me by saying hello—and with no dirty looks or anything. I didn’t know what had changed since I’d last seen him, but I was glad he could at least tolerate me now.

The sound of Mila moaning took my attention away from the brothers as I saw her standing next to Bryton, his fork in her mouth as she closed her eyes.

“What’s with this cake?” I asked. “It can’t be that good.” They all looked at me like I’d just kicked a puppy. “What?”

“Wyatt, control your woman,” Trevor said, narrowing his eyes at me.

I loved sweets as much as the next person, but they acted like it was sent from God himself.

It’s just cake.

“And I’m dating you,” Wyatt shook his head, grabbing his fork and cutting a piece. “Try it.”

Everyone watched as I leaned forward and took a bite off Wyatt’s fork.

Holy shit. This is the most amazing cake I’ve ever tasted.

Part of me wanted to fake disappointment, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Not when I now knew exactly why they were all obsessed over it.

What the hell did Evelyn put in this?

“Okay, yeah, that’s good cake,” I said, licking my lips.

“Thank God, for a second there thought we’d have to disown you. And I like you,” Trevor sighed dramatically.

Even with Evelyn’s threat hanging over us, we each grabbed another bite of the cake before filing out of the kitchen. No doubt Evelyn would return and drag us all out if we didn’t make an appearance soon.

“You’re lucky you like the cake,” Wyatt said as we hung back from the others.

“And if I hadn’t?” I questioned, peering up at him as I sucked the frosting covered fork. Wyatt’s eyes widened as I slowly licked it before pulling it from my mouth.

Wyatt lowered his head closer to me, his chocolate-y breath

fanning my face.

"Then I wouldn't be able to lick the frosting off of you." His thumb grazed my bottom lip as he spoke, and my breath hitched in my throat. I swallowed back the moan that threatened to come out as I pictured him doing just that. "But if you're good, maybe I'll let you cum as I lick it off," he added.

Unable to help myself, I gasped, my eyes widening.

With a wicked smile he stepped around me and walked out of the kitchen. I took a moment, trying to calm my heart and the heat pooling in my belly.

Stop it. Now is not the time to be turned on.

And the cheeky bastard knew exactly what he did to me.

EVERYONE GATHERED around Mateo as he opened presents in the backyard. His friends had all pitched in to get him a bunch of little presents. Trevor and Bryton somehow got a signed football and jersey by a player Mateo absolutely loved. When Evelyn gifted him with a game he'd wanted for his PlayStation, he all but lifted his mom in a hug, grinning from ear to ear.

I watched everyone give their presents, my stomach dropping with each one. I looked down at the wrapped gift in my hands, feeling nervous.

How the hell am I going to top any of those presents?

Wyatt and Landon haven't even given theirs yet.

Needing to go before them, I shuffled forward and awkwardly held out my gift. I didn't know what to get him. I mean, what do you get an eighteen-year-old boy? When I asked Wyatt, his helpful suggestion was beef jerky. Yes, beef jerky. It had taken everything in me not to smack him for the shitty present idea.

"Happy Birthday."

I played with the rings on my fingers as I watched Mateo open the present, knowing it couldn't top the others, but I still hoped he liked it.

"Woah." Mateo said as he unwrapped the photo album I'd put together for him, tearing the wrapping paper. I'd collected a series of photos I'd taken over the weeks. Some were from the afternoon when I first met Mateo and the team, and some were from the game I'd watched him play. There were candid shots of his family cheering him on from the stands, and even some of him playing through the years, courtesy of Evelyn.

“Check it out!” he said, turning the album around to show everyone a photo I’d taken during his game. It showed Mateo in side-profile, his arm cocked back, mid-throw, and his eyes focused straight ahead.

That’s a damn good photo if I say so myself.

“How did you get some of these?”

“The younger ones I got from your mom, and I took a bunch at your game.”

Beside me, Wyatt leaned forward for a better look. After his beef jerky suggestion, I’d kept him in the dark.

“Damn, I look good,” Mateo declared as his friends gathered around for a look. “Josie, thank you!” He flashed me a wide smile, and the joy on his face eased my nerves.

“Of course,” I grinned back.

Finally, it was Wyatt and Landon’s turn. Wyatt stepped forward and handed Mateo a small box.

“This is from Landon and I.”

Mateo eagerly opened the box only to freeze, his mouth hanging open.

“Wait, are you serious?” Mateo looked between Landon and Wyatt with wide eyes.

“It’s all yours,” Landon nodded as he walked over and stood beside him, giving his shoulder a squeeze. Mateo’s hands shook as he stared down at the car keys sitting in the box.

“You aren’t messing with me, right?” Mateo’s eyes looked a little glossy as Wyatt grabbed his other shoulder.

“Nope. They’ll drop it off on Monday.”

“You’re about to graduate and we wanted something more reliable for you to drive,” Landon said, his tone almost fatherly.

“I…” Mateo shook his head. “Thank you.”

Beside me I heard Evelyn sniffle as Mateo hugged both Landon and Mateo, profusely thanking them. He clearly wasn’t expecting a car for his birthday.

When Wyatt told me what he and Landon planned to get Mateo, I found it beyond sweet. The two of them wanted Mateo to have a safe car to drive to school, practice and Uni next year. Was it a bit extravagant for an eighteen-year-old? Yes, but like Wyatt said, what’s the point of having money if you can’t spend it on the ones you love?

It really showed just how much he loved his family and how they loved him for him, and not his money.

Wyatt and Landon stepped back as Mateo was immediately swarmed by his friends. Returning to my side, Wyatt wrapped an arm around my shoulders pulling me against him. I leaned into his side as he planted a kiss on the top of my head. Evelyn smiled in our

direction before stepping forward clapping her hands.

“Now, who wants cake?”

JOSIE

"You know this is my first time going to an actual game," Lydia said as we all made our way through security.

"Wait, you've never been?" Mila turned around to look at Lydia with disbelief.

"Don't worry, we'll pop your hockey cherry," Tasha added as she hooked her arm through Lydia's. "Josie's boyfriend got us great seats, so you'll enjoy it."

My face flushed at her words.

I still can't believe Wyatt Boone is my boyfriend.

You'd think after officially being a couple for two weeks that I'd be accustomed to it now, but no. Just the mention of his name was still enough to make me giddy.

The four of us made our way inside the arena, huddling together to make it through the crowds. It was already insane inside, which made sense with the Knights being on an eight-game winning streak. Ever since Coach changed Crosby's position, the team was unstoppable.

After a couple of away games, the team were back on home turf, and the locals came in hordes.

Flashing our tickets, we walked all the way down to the boards to our seats. We were positioned just a few feet to the side of the goalie, giving us a great view of the entire rink. We were in the direct line where all the action would happen—something both Mila and I were stoked about.

Shuffling down the row I caught sight of two familiar faces.

"Josie!" Mateo called out, causing people around us to look over. Next to him Landon head turned in our direction. The two of them were seated behind us instead of all of us in one row.

When the four of us girls stopped in front of them, I watched Mateo's eyes widened. He looked from Tasha to Lydia to Mila and then to me.

"Woah." His reaction came as no surprise, it was the same look most guys got when they met Tasha; even Trevor had the same response. Both she and Lydia were beyond gorgeous. It didn't help Tasha wore a pair of tight leather pants and a bright red tube top showing off her tanned skin, her long, blonde hair cascading down her

back.

"Landon, Mateo, these are my friends, Tasha and Lydia." I gestured to the two of them. "Landon and Mateo are Wyatt's brothers."

"Obviously I'm the better brother. Nice to meet you" Mateo winked. I glanced at Landon, finding him staring at Lydia. As Lydia looked at him with an approving expression, I had a sudden thought that maybe I shouldn't have introduced them.

Lydia will chew him up and spit him out. But then again I've seen Landon hold his own.

In the last few weeks, I'd come to learn more about Landon, and he was just as hard-headed as Lydia. They were both as stubborn as all hell, completely immovable once their minds were made up about something.

Landon gave her a cool nod before looking past her at the rink. As Lydia frowned slightly at the dismissal, I quickly nudged her towards her seat.

"What was that about?" Tasha whispered.

"Not a clue," I replied.

We took our seats, with Lydia at one end, followed by Tasha, Me and then Mila, with Mateo and Landon behind us.

"Why didn't Evelyn come?" I asked Mateo over my shoulder.

"With the team playing the *Blizzards* mom knew not to come."

"What's wrong with the *Blizzards?*" Tasha asked.

Mateo grinned and leaned forward. "Let me tell you darling." Both her and I raised our eyebrows at the endearment.

"The Blizzards and the Knights have a lifelong rivalry. Every time they play each other, someone gets into a huge fight," he explained. "Usually more than one."

I already knew of the rivalry, but hearing Mateo say it made my stomach churn. Wyatt can't get hurt again, he's finally back to his old self.

"Bryton told me about some new player on the other team that's known for getting in fights every game, regardless of who they're playing," Mila added.

"So, basically a bunch of men fighting to show dominance," Lydia supplied.

"Have you never been to a game before?" Landon suddenly asked, though it came out more like a taunt than a question.

"No. And?" Lydia turned and looked at him, her eyebrow haughtily raised, seemingly impervious to Landon's intimidating stare.

"Don't worry if they come too close. I'll protect you beautiful ladies," Mateo butted in, cutting the tension. I grinned at Mateo. The kid knew no boundaries. Personally, I found it funny and by the grins on my friend's faces I could tell they did too. If he was older, it would

be a different story.

A few minutes later, the stadium lights dimmed, and the start of the game was announced.

"DAMN, THEY'RE PLAYING ROUGH TONIGHT," Mila said, both of us wincing as one of our players took a particularly hard hit. I knew the Blizzards and the Toronto Knights were rivals but watching it in person was a whole different thing.

At first, the Knights were playing friendly-ish, but the Blizzards instantly came out of the gate with hard hits. Hits that the refs should have called them out for. At almost every turn, they slammed our players into the glass or tripped them.

Wyatt managed to avoid some of the harder hits, mostly thanks to Trevor and Bryton. The two did their jobs covering Wyatt, but damn, they took some nasty blows. The last guy who'd slammed Bryton hard into the wall, had Mila out of her seat, screaming at the ref. I didn't blame her at all. It felt like the refs were blind.

"Ow," I groaned, closing one eye as I shrunk back in my seat. "That had to hurt." It was hard to watch as one of our players was slow getting up off the ice. Everyone around us booed and yelled as the ref ignored what was an illegal hit.

The players barreled down the ice as Bryton expertly handled the puck in front of him, Wyatt and Trevor right by him. It was still incredible to watch the three of them play together, like they were one and knew exactly what the other would do next. All three moved on the ice so fast, weaving in and around players as they neared the goalie.

I held my breath, Mila beside me doing the same, as Bryton brought his stick back and flicked it forward. The speed and precision were as spot on as Wyatt's. I lost sight of the puck as it flew towards the goalie, a mess of players in the way.

A small cannon sound echoed around the arena, followed by deafening cheers. Score. Unbelievably, I could hear Mila's screams above those of the crowd.

"I sleep with him!" she screamed, and the two girls sitting on the other side of her sent her weird looks. Of course, Mila didn't give a shit as she cheered her boyfriend on, not afraid to tell everyone Bryton belonged to her. It was one of the things I liked about Mila in the short time I'd know her—she was unapologetically herself.

Turning my attention back to the ice, my eyes landed on Wyatt

immediately. I probably should've paid more attention to what the other players were doing, but I only had eyes for my man. It was hard not to when he looked so good in his uniform.

Also, the fact I know he looks even better out of it.

I was so busy thinking of all the ways to congratulate him on his win tonight, that I almost missed the two players hurtling towards us. Yanked from my thoughts, I realized one of those players was Wyatt.

With wide eyes, I watched in horror as one of the Blizzards players violently slammed Wyatt against the plexiglass in front of me. The boom that sounded from the impact shook my bones as the plexiglass rattled. I wasn't even thinking as I stood up and banged the glass with my fist.

"What the fuck!" I slammed the glass over and over as I yelled. "That was an illegal hit, you asshole!"

I could barely see the guy's face underneath his helmet, but I knew he was staring at me.

"Play like a fucking adult you piece of shit!" I honestly didn't know I was capable of the anger I felt, but the thought of anyone hurting Wyatt infuriated me. A tapping on the glass turned my attention away from number 46, and as I met Wyatt's blue eyes, I felt my rage abate.

He grinned at me from beneath his helmet as he gave me a thumbs up, letting me know he was fine. I hadn't realized the ref had blown the whistle and that we were drawing a slight crowd, until I felt Tasha tug on my hand. Feeling a little embarrassed, I took my seat. Yet, as number 46 glared at me, I couldn't refrain from mouthing *fuck you*.

My hands shook and my right one throbbed from hitting the glass.

"Damn, Josie. Going all she-hulk," Mateo joked behind me.

"He had it coming," I huffed, crossing my arms.

"Don't touch her boyfriend," Tasha nudged my shoulder teasingly. I should have felt more embarrassed than I did, but seeing Wyatt hit like that did something to me, even though I knew it was all part of the sport.

The game continued, the hits still harder than necessary, as the clock slowly ticked down. The Knights led 3-1. I watched as Wyatt moved into position on the ice, number 46 in front of him. From where I sat, I couldn't see much, but it looked like one of them was talking.

A sinking feeling appeared in my gut as number 46 shifted forward a little.

Nothing good will come of this.

Seconds later, Wyatt dropped his stick and launched himself at the player. Wyatt's gloved fist slammed into the side of his helmet and the two of them fell to the ice, Wyatt's helmet flying off. One second everything was calm and the next players from both teams were

throwing punches at each other, refs whistles sounding off as the crowd went crazy.

Jumping to my feet, I pressed against the glass, trying to find Wyatt amongst the throng of limbs and sticks. I felt helpless as I watched Trevor and Bryton pull Wyatt away from number 46 as players from the other team did the same with their own teammate.

Behind me, Mateo and Landon shouted, but I couldn't make out their words over the crowd. Coach Barnum stood in the box, screaming at his players, but no one listened. Tensions were high the whole game and whatever happened between Wyatt and number 46 simply lit the fuse.

Moments later the refs managed to separate the two teams, the players holding each other back as they continued shouting at each other. As some players skated off the ice, I finally saw Wyatt, still restrained by Trevor and Bryton. Still missing his helmet, I was horrified to see blood running down the side of his face and lip as he smirked at number 46.

For a split second, the sight of Wyatt all aggressive, dripping blood and smirking made my heart race.

Something is so wrong with me that I find this hot.

I pushed the thought from my mind as Wyatt shook off Trevor and Bryton's hold and skated off the ice.

"What the hell just happened?" Mila asked. "I haven't seen Wyatt lose his cool in a long time."

Frowning, I recalled that he had a reputation for being a hothead when he was first drafted, but after proving himself in his debut season, he'd settled down.

Until now.

"Wonder what that was about?" Mateo said behind me, but none of us had an answer.

The ref announced both Wyatt and number 46 were ejected from the game and the entire crowd booed in response.

"I'm going to go check on him. I'll text you guys later," I said without taking my eyes off Wyatt.

"Of course. Go make sure he's okay," Tasha nodded.

As I slid out of the aisle and made my way up the stairs, I could feel eyes on me. After my outburst, Knights fans would likely wonder who I was to Wyatt.

It took me only a few minutes to make my way down the hallway leading to the locker room, flashing my security pass to the guard as I passed. I stopped in front of the locker room doors, forcing myself to take a moment to compose myself.

"Wyatt?" I peeked my head in looking around. The room was a lot messier than the last time I was there. Gear, bags, clothes strewn

about. Hearing the sound of something slamming, I cautiously entered.

Wyatt stood in front of his cubby, throwing his gear inside. I could only see the side of his face, but I could tell he was angry.

"Wyatt?" I said quietly.

"What are you doing here, Josie?" He didn't look in my direction. Ignoring his curt tone, I walked over to him.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine," he hissed, grabbing a pair of sweatpants and yanking them on.

"Want to—"

"I don't want to talk about it, Josie," Wyatt snapped, finally looking directly at me. His injuries looked much worse up close. There were nasty cuts on his lip and on his eyebrow and his right eye was almost swollen shut. "You should go."

"Give me your keys."

"What?"

"Give me your keys," I repeated firmly, holding out my hand. I'd caught a ride with the girls to the game and there was no way I was letting Wyatt drive looking the way he did. He just stood there staring at me, his jaw clenching and unclenching.

"Don't make me say it again, Wyatt." I knew he was angry over what happened on the ice, and he didn't mean to snap at me the way he did, so I tried not to take his tone to heart.

I also knew I wasn't leaving.

As though sensing my resolution, Wyatt shook his head, grabbed his bag off the ground and came towards me. His keys dropped in my hand as he brushed past—could practically feel the anger coming off him in waves.

Without another word he led us out of the locker room towards the back door to the players parking lot. I stayed silent, letting him have his moment.

Thankfully, no one was around as the two of us silently made our way to his car. I knew at any moment reporters and fans would appear, eager to know what initiated the fight between Wyatt and number 46.

While he threw his stuff in the backseat, I got in the driver's side.

Biting my tongue, I put the car in reverse and quickly sped out of the parking lot. The silence between us made my skin itch with the need to fill it, but a quick glance at Wyatt glowering out the window kept me from speaking.

Coach would be beyond pissed after what transpired during the game, and I hoped Wyatt wouldn't be in too much trouble.

You're dreaming. Coach will rip him a new one.

The ride back home was painfully slow as the tension in the car built. As soon as I parked the car I half-expected Wyatt to jump out of the car. Instead, he waited for me to get out first.

During the ride up to Wyatt's apartment in the elevator, my frustration grew. I understood that he didn't want to talk about it, yet, at the same time, as his girlfriend I felt that he should be able to talk to me.

At least say something. Anything.

I wanted to be the person he told things to, leaned on. Isn't that what being in a relationship is about?

As we entered his apartment, Wyatt threw his stuff down near the door, prompting me to break my silence.

"Let's get you cleaned up."

"I'm fine," he said curtly.

"No, you aren't. Let's get you…"

"I said I was fine, Josie!" Wyatt yelled before he turned on his heel and started walking away. My entire body tensed as memories of my ex flashed through my mind. For a moment, I felt myself instinctively curl up, the sense of worthlessness rearing.

No. I'm not that girl anymore. I will not let a man, even Wyatt, speak to me like that.

"Wyatt Arthur Boone!" My voice was low and lethal, and for a moment I doubted myself. But then he stopped and slowly turned around.

"I will not tolerate being talked to like that. Do you hear me? I let it slide the first time but that was your one free pass. I know you're angry, but I don't deserve to be spoken to like that."

When he said nothing, I raised my chin and spoke again.

"I said. Do. You. Hear. Me?"

The dark cloud in his expression passed and his shoulders dropped as he nodded. Realizing just how far he crossed a line. Wyatt opened his mouth to speak, but I held my hand up to stop him.

"We are getting you cleaned up," I stated, leaving no room for argument. I brushed past him and made my way upstairs to his bedroom where I'd spotted a first aid kit in his ensuite. I could hear his footsteps on the stairs behind me.

Smart man.

"Sit." I pointed to the toilet seat as I rummaged under the sink. Wyatt obeyed and I could feel his eyes on me as I grabbed what I needed.

Wetting a cotton ball with hydrogen peroxide I moved to stand in-between his legs as he tilted his face up towards me.

"Josie, I'm—" I cut him off by pressing the cotton ball to the cut on his eyebrow. He immediately hissed and closed his eyes. I pulled away

after a second and he blinked up at me.

"Okay, I deserved that." I avoided eye contact by wiping the now dried blood from his face. "You're right. I shouldn't have spoken to you like that, you didn't deserve it, and I am so sorry, Josie."

I gave him a small nod as I cleaned him up.

"I promise you I will never speak to you like that again. I swear."

I finally met his eyes, brimming with guilt, and I knew he was sorry. I felt proud that I'd stood up for myself. It had been a long time coming, but I was no longer the same girl I was in Uni.

"Good," I replied, softly tilting his chin up as I wiped at the blood from his lip. His bottom lip was swollen, the cut quite big. The one on his eyebrow wasn't as bad, but it looked like it hurt—and his eye turned blacker by the minute.

"What happened on the ice?" I asked softly. I felt his jaw tense under my hand.

"That dick, he…"

I stayed quiet, letting him gather his thoughts as I reached over to grab some ointment.

"He kept making comments about you." His voice was full of venom, and I could feel him tense.

"What kind of comments?" I asked slowly, unsure that I wanted to know.

"I can't…I can't." Wyatt shook his head. Judging by his reaction, the comments weren't nice, and I decided it was best to let it slide for now.

"I'm sorry I got in a fight." Our eyes met again as he looked up at me.

"I'm not mad about the fight," I said, softly dabbing the ointment on his cuts. "From the sounds of it, the asshole deserved it." Cupping his cheek, I bent down to look at him better. "I will never be mad at you for defending me, Wyatt." And I meant it—his actions meant more to me than he knew. "What I *am* mad at is how you treated me afterwards."

His eyes looked away from mine, a glimpse of shame in them.

"Don't take your anger out on me. Let me help you get rid of it. That is what relationships are about."

"I know. I'm sorry." He raised his hands and rested them on my hips. "I was so caught up in the fight, I was blind to everything else. I'm sorry for pushing you away."

"Good, because I'm not going anywhere." My thumb softly brushed across his cheek. "But next time…hit him harder, okay?"

Wyatt laughed loudly, grimacing with pain at the same time.

Now there's the man I'm falling in love with. Even bloodied, he's the most gorgeous man I've ever laid eyes on.

“Next time,” he promised, grinning up at me.

JOSIE

"Be careful and let me know when you get there." My fingers played with Wyatt's hair at the base of his neck. The team was set to go on another round of away games but thankfully this time was only for two days. Although it felt like they'd just come home.

"I will." Wyatt's hands rested against my lower back. The cut on his lip and forehead slowly healing. Ever since that night, things between us had intensified. Every time I looked at him, my pulse skyrocketed. Sometimes it felt like I couldn't breathe when I looked at him.

I was falling hard and fast for this man. It was beyond scary, because he was the last person I'd expected to come into my life and yet, here we were.

"Are you going to be okay while I'm gone?" His thumbs rubbed the strip of skin under my sweater.

"Yeah, us girls are going to have a girl's night tomorrow."

"Oh, a girl's night." He wiggled his eyebrows.

Laughing I shook my head. "Hate to break it to you, but when we have a girl's night, we don't have pillow fights in our underwear."

His eyes widened and he looked at me with a hurt expression. "Are you serious? What a way to ruin a guy's fantasy."

"Sorry," I giggled, softly tugging at his hair.

"I'm still going to imagine that though. Or more importantly, imagine you." The dirty smirk on his face had me rolling my eyes.

Of course he went there.

"Come on love birds, let's hit the road!" Trevor yelled from where he stood beside the team bus. Beside us, I heard Bryton curse at him while saying his own goodbye to Mila.

"I better go before Coach comes out."

I could feel myself pouting, wanting him to stay but I knew he couldn't. "Okay. Do great. I'll be cheering at home for you."

At my words he smiled even wider. "Will do, baby." My heart stuttered in my chest.

I loved it when he called me that.

He leaned down, pressing his lips against mine. I kissed him back, letting him know just how much I'd miss him.

Before our kiss could turn into a full make out session, something that seemed to happen more often than not we pulled apart.

"I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too," he said, planting a kiss on my forehead.

"Shit heads! In the bus! Now!" A deep voice rumbled nearing us. We pulled apart and glanced over at Coach stalking for the bus. "Nice seeing you Mila and Josie." He greeted Mila and I with a soft smile, the team staring at him with stunned expressions.

He may be incredibly intimidating, but he was always surprisingly kind to me and Mila. Every time I saw Coach, he made a point to say hello, something that seemed to shock all the guys every single time.

Not my fault the coach has a soft spot for us.

"Good luck tomorrow, Coach." I smiled, which he returned before stepping on the bus.

"Did you bribe him?" Wyatt asked, the other guys standing around looking just as bewildered.

"No," I laughed. "He just likes me."

"Yeah, I don't believe you." Wyatt and Bryton shook their heads at each other.

"I better go. I'll see you in a couple of days." Pecking his lips one last time I stepped back, dropping my arms from him. Wyatt winked as he and Bryton headed for the bus. Mila and I stood there watching our men load onto the bus. As the doors closed, Mila turned to me and grinned.

"Girl's weekend!"

MUSIC PLAYED SOFTLY in the background as I finished curling my hair in the mirror. Mila applied lipstick next to me, while Lydia sat on the edge of my bed, typing away on her phone.

"What do you think?" Tasha asked, as she stepped out of the bathroom, doing a little twirl.

"You look great," I grinned at my best friend. She wore a gorgeous, sparkling, gold dress that highlighted her tanned skin and hugged her frame perfectly. The whole right side had cut outs from the top of her ribs down to her hips, showing stripes of bare skin, and her hair was pulled into a messy ponytail with a few tendrils framing her face.

Instead of having a girl's night in, we'd decided we needed to go out and have fun. The guys had won their away game, which seemed as good an excuse as any to go out and celebrate a little.

Next to me, Mila capped her lipstick and stepped back, running her

hands over her dress. She looked stunning, with her dark, curly hair cascading down her back. The all-white silk dress did amazing things for her dark skin tone, and the high slit down one side showed off her long legs.

While she went to take a picture, probably to send to Bryton, I went over to my closet to grab my heels.

"Everything okay?" I asked Lydia as I held onto my dresser for balance. I already knew I'd regret wearing them, but they matched my peach-colored dress perfectly. The fabric clung to me, and I knew if Wyatt were here, I wouldn't make it out of the apartment.

"Yeah, just a last-minute printing thing," Lydia waved me off. I was glad she'd decided to join us tonight. She'd been so busy running the magazine, trying to expand our readership, and I knew she needed a night out to just let go. And who knew? Maybe she'd meet someone. Looking the way she did, in her red silk dress that showed plenty of cleavage and leg, she'd be warding men off tonight for sure.

It only took us all a few more minutes to get ready, but we spent a good twenty minutes taking pictures. It was an unwritten rule that you can't get dressed up without taking at least one good photo. Plus, I wanted to send Wyatt a picture to congratulate him on his win.

A million and a half photos later, we gathered by the front door.

"The Uber is downstairs waiting for us. We all have our purses, phones, money?" Tasha rattled off as we each nodded. "Remember we keep an eye on each other. If someone needs to use the bathroom, we all go." Her tone left no room for argument.

As the others started filtering out the door I stayed back with Tasha. The others wouldn't have noticed, but I had—her hands shook slightly as she held onto her clutch.

"You okay to go? We can always stay home?" I knew that her decision to go to the club with us was a huge deal, and there was a good reason why she was so adamant we stay close to one another. Yet, it was her story to tell, not mine.

"I'm good," Tasha said with a forced smile, but I let it slide.

"I'll be by your side all night. I'd like to see anyone try and get through me." I lifted my arm and flexed. Tasha laughed a little and hooked her arm with mine.

"Best bodyguard ever." Arm in arm we walked out of my apartment, following the girls.

"Let's go have fun."

“SHAKE THAT ASS!” Mila screamed as Tasha practically twerked on her. I threw my head back and laughed as my hips moved to the beat of the music.

The four shots of tequila I’d downed helped me relax and have fun with my friends. Sweat trickled down my back from all the dancing and bodies crowding the dance floor.

While Tasha and Mila danced together, Lydia and I grabbed hands. We kept a tight grip on each other as the crowd jostled us. Even though the club was jammed packed, I was having a blast. It’d been so long since I just let go and had fun—it was exactly what I needed.

“Shots!” Tasha yelled over to us. The other two agreed and tugged me after them.

One more shot, but that’s it. Any more than that, and I knew I’d be logging some serious time in front of the toilet.

Tasha leaned over the bar and shouted at the bartender to give us four shots. I narrowed my eyes at the way the bartender ogled her and stared right at her chest. I’d said I would be Tasha’s bodyguard, and I meant it. I gently moved Tasha back and stood in her place. It was no surprise I didn’t get the same reaction from the bartender as he slid four shots towards us.

I didn’t say a word as I grabbed them and turned my back on him to pass the shots out to our group.

“To a girl’s night out,” I shouted over the music, all four of us huddled together.

“To making new friends,” Mila added, flashing a grin. In one go, I knocked the shot of tequila back. Swallowing the burning liquid, I tried not to cough as it slid down my throat.

Damn, there’s a reason I hate tequila. No matter how many times you drink it, it still tastes like shit.

Lydia, Tasha, and Mila let out a loud ‘whoop’ and we headed back out onto the dance floor.

With the new shot in my system, I found myself grinding back against Tasha. As she laughed, I was certain she’d recalled the same memory as me. The two of us at a club, back in Uni pretending to be lovers when guys wouldn’t leave us alone.

Listening to the music I closed my eyes, my hands running through my hair. It took a second for my brain to register the new pair of hands at my hips. Hands that were larger than Tasha’s and tugging me backwards. My eyes opened and my head snapped to the side to see a random guy grinding against my ass, his hands gripping my hips tightly.

I tried to wiggle out of his grasp, disgusted by his touch. Sure, it's a club and dancing with strangers isn’t new to me, but I wasn’t here for that. I had a boyfriend, and I was there with my girlfriends.

“Not interested,” I yelled over my shoulders, wiggling out of his hold but his grip was firm. I think he was drunk and mistook my getting away as me wiggling my ass back against him. He ground against me harder, and I clenched my teeth.

Now angry, I jerked my entire body away and stomped my heel on his foot. This time he let me go with a yelp. I spun around and glared at him. “I said I’m not interested.”

“Then why were you grinding against me? You want it.” He advanced forward but the glare on my face seemed to stop him in his tracks. When I wanted, I could have the biggest resting bitch face known to man.

“Go find another girl to grind against.”

“Leave.” I heard Lydia’s voice from behind me. A hand grabbed mine and I instantly knew it was Tasha’s. I felt better knowing I wasn’t alone on the dance floor with the creep.

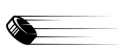
“Not worth it,” the guy grumbled, shoving past me to find the next poor girl.

“What a dick,” Mila said after the guy left.

“Thanks guys.”

“We knew you could handle it, babe,” Tasha grinned, but I could see the underlying concern on her face. I squeezed her hand to calm her fears. *Nothing happened.* I silently told her with my eyes. Her shoulders relaxed and she gave me a squeeze back.

“Some drunk guy isn’t going to ruin our night. Let's dance!” I wanted a genuine smile to replace the look of concern on Tasha's face, even if it meant torturing my feet further in these heels. The other girls cheered, circling around each other.



I LOST track of how long we’d been at the club. My feet were killing me, and my ears were ringing slightly from the loud music. I was sober now, sticking to water, while the others were pretty much drunk at this point.

Mila and Lydia were still out on the dance floor, while Tasha and I managed to find a table off to the side. We could still see them in front of us, sticking to our promise. I grinned at the way Mila and Lydia danced. It was a mix of grinding and…well, I wasn’t sure what to call it. They were drawing a small crowd as they danced but neither seemed to notice or care, thanks to the alcohol in their systems. Tasha and I the only sober ones now.

“You’re happy,” Tasha suddenly spoke beside me.

“What?” I glanced over at her.

“You’re happier than when I left town,” Her eyes looked me over, a knowing smile on her face. I ducked my head, but not before she caught the smile playing at the corners of my mouth. She was right. I was happier. I hadn’t realized just how much of a shell I’d become until I met Wyatt.

Over the past year or so, I’d retreated into myself. The passing of my dad weighed heavily on me. Everything in life seemed bland and pointless. I’d existed in a perpetual state of sadness, feeling like a piece of me was missing.

Tasha saw and tried to get me out, like we were right now, but I’d always declined. She almost didn’t go to Florida, wanting to stay here with me, but I’d refused to let my sadness bring her down any more than she was. So, I’d practically shoved her out the door.

During the first week after she’d left, I buried my head in work and stayed home. Even Lydia tried to get me to do something, but I wasn’t interested, preferring to sit at home in front of the television with a bottle of wine.

Until I met Wyatt.

Our chance meeting in the elevator changed everything.

In just a matter of weeks, I’d felt happier than I have in a long time. Spending time with Wyatt brought me back to my old self. The person I’d lost in university and then again after my dad died. In many ways he’d saved me and didn’t even know it.

“I am happy,” I admitted. “Wyatt is just…” There really weren’t any words to describe him.

“You love him.” Her words made my head snap back up, eyes wide.

Love Wyatt? I can’t be in love with him. It’s too soon. Right?

“I…I don’t love him,” I stammered.

Tasha placed her hand on top of mine and squeezed. “The look in your eyes says differently.” Her words settled in my chest.

Was I in love with Wyatt? I liked being around him and I missed him when he was away, but was that love? I didn’t think I truly knew what being in love felt like.

“I…” I struggled to find the words. “How do you know if you’re in love?” I asked, just loud enough that she could hear me over the music

“Do you feel like your world would be empty without him?”

I went quiet at her words, a thousand thoughts running through my head. I wrestled with them as I tried to deny that I loved Wyatt, but whenever his face appeared in my head, everything else faded away. His smile alone was enough to make my stomach erupt in butterflies.

Before I could think more on that feeling, I felt my phone buzz in my purse.

Is Wyatt calling me?

Pulling it out, I saw the alert on my screen, and everything around me faded away as my stomach dropped and I gasped.

"Josie?" I could barely hear Tasha as she scooted closer to me, looking down at my phone "Fuck," she cursed. That was all I heard as I stared at the words on my phone.

Wyatt Boone, the star player for the Toronto Knights, was seen kissing an unknown woman as he left for the team's away game. Sources tell us it's his new girlfriend, Josie Scott. The magazine reporter was seen only hours later dancing at a club with another man. Is Miss Scott truly the one for our beloved hockey player, or if she is in it to further her career?

Attached below the article were pictures of Wyatt and I kissing and then a slightly blurry picture of me and the creep who'd hit on me.

The phone fell from my hands.

JOSIE

"Josie, don't read anymore." Tasha's voice sounded so far away. All I could see were the pictures of Wyatt and me. My eyes darted to the picture of the stranger from earlier. His hands were gripping my waist and from the angle it looked like I was willingly grinding back against him.

Who took this?

The fact that the article was out already, meant someone had to have followed me to the club and taken the picture.

My phone continued to buzz with tweets. I couldn't stop myself from clicking on one, taking me to twitter. It didn't matter that it was 11 at night, people were tweeting. The tweets ranged from people who were angry that Wyatt had a girlfriend, to comments that I was too ugly to be with him, to calling me a gold digger who only wanted to further her career.

I couldn't stop myself from reading one after another. Each one worse than the one before it. In just a matter of minutes, both mine and Wyatt's names were trending. I was about to click on another tweet when my phone was snatched from my hand.

"Stop." Tasha gripped my phone in her hand. I looked at her, not fully comprehending what was happening. "Stay right here."

I just nodded as she quickly stood up and went over to Mila and Lydia. I watched absently as she spoke to them quickly before all three came over to me. Without another word, they pulled me to my feet and towards the exit. Mila and Lydia did a good job at hurtling us through the crowd as Tasha gripped me to her side.

We pushed through the doors only for a flash to blind me. Seconds later the yelling began.

Are you dating Wyatt Boone?
Cheating on your boyfriend already?
How did you meet?
Who were you dancing with?

I completely froze, my eyes darting around.

“Move!” A hand gripped my arm tightly. With the help of the girls, we pushed through the crowd of reporters, towards an Uber idling on the curb. I was shoved inside, pressed between my girls as they ordered the driver to drive. The windows muffled the sound of yelling, but I could still hear the questions being hurled at me.

“It’s okay. It’s okay,” Tasha chanted, rubbing a hand on my arm.

I glanced down and saw hands shaking like leaves. I looked over at Tasha, my breathing heavy and my eyes wide.

What the hell just happened?

I’d known at some point word would get around about Wyatt and me. He was a well-known hockey player, people adored him, so it made sense there’d be interest when he started dating someone. I just hadn’t anticipated this would be how people would find out.

The fact it went viral so fast made my stomach roll. Whoever took that picture immediately sent it to some news station that already had the article ready.

How could they do that?

Suddenly, I realized in the shock of it all, I hadn’t spoken to the one person I needed to.

Wyatt.

“Where’s my phone!” I had to talk to him before he saw the pictures or the article. He had to know it wasn’t what it looked like. Tasha looked at me with apprehension, probably thinking I was going to look at the comments, but she must have seen the desperation in my expression, and she handed my phone over.

Ignoring the notifications, I went straight for Wyatt’s number. Just as I was about to call him, my phone rang. Wyatt’s profile photo flashed across my screen.

“Wyatt,” I breathed into the phone.

*“*Josie,” The sound of his voice instantly brought tears to my eyes.

“Wyatt,” I said again, my voice came out all shaky and soft as tears rolled down my face. “I…I didn’t. I…”

*“*I know, baby.*”*

He’s seen the pictures.

I started crying harder, everything hitting me all at once.

“I…I promise, I didn’t. Wyatt, I didn’t cheat.”

“Baby, I know you never would.”

Relief washed over me, but now that I’d started crying, I couldn’t stop. “I’m on my way, okay? I’ll be there as soon as I can.” I heard him mumble *‘fuck’* under his breath followed by honking. “Let me talk to one of the girls.”

I wordlessly passed the phone to Tasha. Mila pulled me into her side as I silently cried, Lydia turning in the front to squeeze my knee.

I couldn’t hear what Wyatt was saying to Tasha, but she was

replying back with ‘yes’. She mumbled something back to him before passing me the phone again.

“I’ll be there in a few hours okay baby? Go to the apartment with the girls and ignore your phone. Can you do that for me?”

“Okay.”

“I’m on my way, baby. I’m on my way.”

“HERE, DRINK THIS.” Lydia handed me a mug filled with warm tea. I wasn’t a big tea drinker, but the warm mug felt good in my hands. I’d managed to calm down a bit before we got to my apartment.

Thankfully, the building wasn’t swarmed with people, and we were able to get inside easily. The paparazzi hadn’t worked out where I lived yet.

“How are you feeling?” Mila asked softly as she rubbed my back. All three of them were lifesavers tonight, the way they got me out of the club and away from the reporters. And now here they were, gathering around and looking after me.

“I don’t know,” I replied honestly. I wasn’t sure how to feel. Everything just happened so quickly, and I was still trying to wrap my head around it.

I wasn’t an idiot; I knew people would find out eventually. I was surprised we’d managed to stay under the radar as long as we had. When I became Wyatt’s girlfriend, I knew this was the price to be with him. There’s always a price when you're with someone as well-known as him.

I just hadn’t expected the reporters outside of the club, hadn’t expected an article to come out about us, people already questioning my intentions. It was a sore spot for me because I didn’t want Wyatt, his family, or anyone to think I was using him. Wyatt knew I wasn’t, but that insecure part of me reared its ugly head.

I just needed to see Wyatt. Needed to hear that we were okay and that we would get through this together.

“The same thing happened when I started dating Bryton,” Mila said after a moment.

“It did?” Out of everyone Mila was the one who would get this. I briefly remembered reading stuff about a Knights player dating someone. It was a few months before I met Wyatt, and at the time I hadn’t paid much attention.

“When word got out that Bryton was dating a girl of color, some people didn’t like it. Got spammed with hate comments and DM’s.” I

reached out and squeezed her hand, my heart breaking at her words. I couldn't imagine how that was for her. It must have been a hundred times worse than this.

"There's still a lot of people who don't like a white guy dating a girl of color."

"That's so messed up," Lydia said, shaking her head.

"But I got through it…it still happens, but with Bryton by my side nothing else matters. You learn to ignore the hateful comments and messages you get. You ignore the articles that come out about your relationship." Her words eased the tight band around my chest. She'd been there and she got it. "These people don't know you or Wyatt."

She was right. No one knew me or Wyatt. They were just people on the outside having stupid opinions on things they knew nothing about.

"Thank you." I looked at each of them. "Sorry for ruining girl's night." I felt bad the night got cut short because of me.

"Don't be sorry," Tasha shook her head. "We had fun, plus…my feet are killing me," she groaned, kicking her heels off.

"Thank God. Mine started hurting hours ago." Lydia toed hers off as well. I laughed as all of us took off our heels, groaning. Dancing and heels don't mix.

"Thank you, guys." I laid my head on Tasha's shoulders as we all scooted together on the couch.

"That's what friends are for."

"WHERE IS SHE?"

It was almost 3 o'clock in the morning when I heard Wyatt's voice at my door. Just the sound of his voice made my chest ache. Slowly, I untangled myself from Lydia and Mila, passed out on my couch.

"She's—" Tasha started to say but stopped, catching sight of me. The moment Wyatt's eyes landed on me he all but pushed Tasha out of the way, his long legs eating up the distance between us.

My lips trembled as he scooped me up into his arms, lifting me off the ground and I wrapped my legs around his waist. I held onto the back of his head as he placed his face in the crook of my neck.

My whole body shuddered as I breathed him in. Just the smell of him made me feel better. He was still clad in his dress clothes from the game, and the collar dug into my cheek, but I didn't care.

"I'm going to take her to my place. You guys stay." He didn't give Tasha time to say anything back before he turned, with me in his arms, and headed for the elevator.

Wyatt carried me like I weighed nothing, easily hitting the elevator button and wrapping his arm back under my thighs. I clung to him like a baby, my grip only tightening when we got inside. He held me up with one hand and the other rubbed my back, little kisses peppered my head.

Neither of us said a word the entire ride up to his apartment. I was more than fine to soak him in than talk right now. Especially since he'd driven God knows how long in the middle of the night to be there.

I still didn't let go as he shifted me in his arms to unlock the door and re-lock it behind us. Not a single part of me wanted to let go of him. I kept my face buried in his neck as I felt him move around his apartment before he sat down on his couch. In this new position I wiggled into his lap, still wrapped around him like a koala bear.

"Baby." His hands gripped my waist gently. "Are you okay?"

I reluctantly pulled away, slowly meeting his beautiful blue eyes that brimmed with concern. He cupped my cheek, his thumb softly brushing across my skin.

"I'm okay." And I was. After talking to Mila and being with the girls I felt better. More so now that he was here.

"I should have been here. I'm sorry." I shook my head at his forlorn expression.

"You couldn't have known that would happen."

"I could have stopped it though. I—"

I cupped his face this time, silencing him. "It was bound to happen. I knew people would find out about us; it was just a matter of when. It all just took me by surprise." My thumbs rubbed the slight scruff on his face.

My heart ached at the tired, stressed look on his face. His hair was mused like he'd run his fingers through it the entire drive here. I felt guilty that he'd played hockey, then drove all the way back just to be with me.

I would think more about what that meant tomorrow. Wyatt needed to sleep. All of this could. Not like it was going anywhere.

"Let's get some sleep, okay?" Sliding off his lap I held my hand out to him. Wyatt's expression was hard to read as he placed his hand in mine, letting me pull him up off the couch. He stayed quiet as we trudged up the stairs to his room. It'd been a long day, so I tried not to read into the silence as he changed his clothes and climbed into bed.

When he opened his arms, I quickly climbed in beside him, tucking my body into his side. Having him close eased the tension from my body. Despite what happened tonight, I was more certain than ever that I wanted to be with Wyatt. Even if that meant dealing with the paparazzi.

“Thank you for driving all the way here,” I spoke softly.

“Always.”

Yet, I could feel the distance between us suddenly grow, as though there was a wall closing around him.

WYATT

Staring down at Josie's sleeping form, a pit grew in my stomach. It'd been a few hours since we laid down, but I was wide awake despite feeling exhausted. My mind wouldn't shut off. What happened tonight played like a loop in my head.

I'd just arrived at our hotel when my phone started buzzing. I thought it was just Josie texting me, or my family's group chat but, instead I was met with the headline about Josie and I. I couldn't even say it was about me at all. I was only mentioned once, it was Josie they ripped apart. Going on about where she grew up, went to school, her track accident, and her job at *Fusion Weekly*.

In it to further her career.

My blood boiled as I replayed what was said in the article. I spent the three-and-a-half-hour drive here vowing to find the person who wrote that article and make them regret it.

It's one thing to write about me, but Josie? It crosses so many lines.

My heart seized as I thought about Josie crying on the phone to me. The way her voice wobbled as she immediately told me it wasn't true. I didn't need her to tell me. I knew the moment I read it everything about it was false.

The image of that random guy touching her pissed me off though. He touched what was mine and I wasn't there to stop him. What if he did more to her? And then for it to be twisted that she cheated.

I knew the world would find out about Josie and me; it was just a matter of time. Plus, I didn't want to hide her from anyone. I wanted everyone to know she was mine and mine alone. I just hadn't wanted it to be this way.

I hated seeing her upset. Seeing the way her eyes were red from crying. It was my fault she was in this position to begin with. I knew how the paparazzi could be. They were like vultures. I had kind of warned Josie about them, but I hadn't fully prepared her for how it would be when they found out about us.

It was times like this that I hated who I was. Hated that reporters and people on the internet made me into something more than just a hockey player. You never saw other hockey players being followed

and pictures taken of them. I've gotten used to the attention, but Josie shouldn't have too.

Josie shifted in her sleep, pulling me out of my thoughts. She turned so her back was facing me, snuggling deeper into the blankets. I didn't want to leave her, especially after everything, but I needed to get back to Buffalo for our last away game. Coach would already kill me for leaving.

I watched her sleeping for another minute, memorizing every inch of her. I realized yesterday as I ran out of the hotel still wearing my post-game suit, that I loved Josie. I've loved her for a while now—I just hadn't admitted it to myself until I drove like a mad man to reach her. I probably broke a few laws, but if it meant getting to Josie sooner, I hadn't cared.

I knew I should tell her. I should wake her up right now and tell her that I loved her. That sometimes I felt like my heart might stop when I looked at her because it's almost too much. That I'd never felt this way about someone before.

But I hesitated. All different scenarios flashing through my head. The paparazzi dragging her through the media. People sending her hate all because she was with me. Her career ruined. Josie loved her job and what if our relationship took that from her? I would never forgive myself.

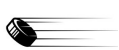
I vowed to do everything in my power to prevent it. Even if it meant ripping my own heart out.

Feeling like I couldn't breathe, I knew I needed to go. As quietly as I could, I slipped out of the bed. I kept an eye on Josie, not wanting her to wake up as I pulled a shirt over my head. I quietly grabbed my phone and wallet, and a pair of shoes before I stood at the foot of the bed.

I watched her, hoping this wouldn't be the last time I saw her. Just the thought of never seeing her again made me double over like I'd been hit in the stomach. I needed to go.

Maybe the long drive back will help bring some clarity on what I need to do.

With one last glance at Josie, I slipped out of my room, leaving my heart back in that bed with her.



"I DON'T CARE if it's six in the morning," I snapped through the phone to my agent, Jerry. "I want the article taken down."

"Wyatt—" he started to say, but I cut him off.

“They can say whatever the fuck they want about me, but not her.” My hands gripped the steering wheel until my knuckles turned white. “I want her name erased completely.”

“Her name is already all over the internet.”

“I don’t pay you millions of dollars for you to make excuses.” I knew I was being a dick, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. I wanted that horrible article down and I wanted it now. “They took her picture without her consent.”

Jerry had been my agent since I got drafted. He’s been great, making sure I get the best deal with my contracts for hockey and brand partnerships. This was the first time that I’d ever asked him to do something personal for me.

“Okay.” Jerry shuffled on the other side of the phone. “I’ll get in touch with the place that posted the article and threaten a lawsuit.”

If anyone could get it done it was Jerry. A little bit of tension left my body, my hands unclenched the steering wheel, regaining feeling back in them.

“Thank you.”

“I’ll get it done.” He was quiet for a moment. “Are you okay?” I knew he’d ask since I snapped at him, which I rarely do.

“I’m fine.” Which was a lie. Every mile away from Josie made my chest ache. I wasn’t sure what I should do anymore. When I left home, I’d thought not being with Josie was the best decision. I shouldn’t drag her into this circus. Yet the thought of not being with her felt like I was being ripped into two.

“Let me know when it's done.” Not wanting to talk about it, I ended the call, filling the car with silence once more.

Before my thoughts could take over, my phone rang, Landon’s name flashing on the screen.

I should have known he’d be up at this hour.

“Hey,” I greeted, hitting speaker phone.

“You’re up early,” he commented.

“Yeah.” I shifted in my seat before continuing. “I take it you read the article.”

“I did. You and Josie are trending on twitter.”

Of course we are.

“Want to talk about it?”

“Lan, I…” I didn’t know where to start, then suddenly it all spilled out. Everything from how scared I was that something had happened to Josie when she called me. How the paparazzi bombarded her and accused her of cheating and using me. How I wasn’t sure if I could let her stay in my life knowing there was a chance she could always be thrown into the media.

“You’re in love with her.” Landon said it so casually, like he’d

known for a while.

"Yes." I didn't even try to say otherwise.

"So why are you fighting it?"

"I'm not. I—"

"Yes, you are. You literally listed off a bunch of stupid reasons to push her away."

"They aren't stupid. You know how they can be."

"I do. All of us have dealt with the press at point or another but you get use to it. Josie will too."

"Lan I can't do that to her."

"Wyatt," Landon said with a sigh, like he couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I love you, but you are an idiot."

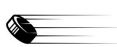
"You didn't even like Josie a few weeks ago," I shot back.

"Yeah, well, I was wrong. She's the best thing to ever happen to you, so remember that before you go and ruin it," Landon said before ending the call.

I looked at my phone with raised eyebrows.

My brother literally hung up on me.

Knowing better than to call him back, I kept my eyes on the road, his words following me the rest of the way to Buffalo.



"DUDE, YOU'RE PLAYING LIKE SHIT," my teammate, Max said next to me as we sat on the bench waiting for my shift on the ice. I didn't bother with a reply. I knew I was. My head wasn't in it, not since I'd left Josie this morning.

The entire game I'd missed shots I should have made in my sleep. I even went as far as letting other players slam me into the boards. By the glare from Coach, he wasn't thrilled by my performance either.

When my shift came back, I got up to hop the board, only for Coach to step in front of me.

"You're sitting out the rest of the game." His tone left no room for discussion.

"But Coach—"

"Sit, Boone."

I felt like a little kid being scolded as I sat back down on the bench. I couldn't blame him for keeping me out of the game. We only had four minutes left and I was letting shots go when I shouldn't be. I was just hurting the team by being out there.

I was a mess, and it was all self-inflicted.

The rest of the game Trevor and Bryton shot me looks like they too

had no clue what was going on with me. When I returned from my overnight trip, I'd avoided them, not wanting to hear what they had to say about the article. Bryton had probably already heard about the whole thing from Mila.

Josie had sent me multiple texts, asking where I went. I knew she was hurt that I'd left in the middle of the night without a word. Yet, when the first message came through, I just stared at my phone, not knowing what to say. My brother's words rattled in my head, fighting for attention against the damn article.

Thankfully, the team won 2-1, maintaining our winning streak.

No thanks to me.

I was on autopilot as I changed out of my uniform and into my suit. The last thing I wanted was to go and talk to the press. When Trevor and Bryton approached me, there was nowhere for me to hide in the small locker room.

"Come on B," Trevor gestured for the door.

"We have press," I said.

I glanced around for Coach, but the two of them shook their heads.

"Already taken care of," Bryton said as the two ushered me out of the locker room. I didn't say a word as we left the arena and got into a waiting car.

"What are you guys doing?" I looked at my two best friends, wondering what they were up to.

Neither answered me as the driver drove us back to the team's hotel. When they steered me towards the bar, I was more than happy to follow. A drink sounded really good right about now.

We found a quiet spot at the back, the bartender already making our drinks.

"Care to tell us what's going on with you?" Trevor crossed his arms and leaned back in his seat.

Should have known they would bring me here to bombard me with questions.

"Haven't seen you play this bad since our first year in Uni," he added.

"Not even when you were hurt did you play this bad," Bryton said, the two of them staring at me, waiting for an explanation. The bartender placed my whiskey down and I took a long sip before answering.

"My head just wasn't in it tonight," I lied, keeping my gaze on my drink.

"Yeah, that was a shitty lie," Trevor said.

"You can do better than that," Bryton shook his head. "Everyone knows you drove to see Josie after the article. So, what happened?"

"Was Josie mad about it?" Trevor asked.

I shook my head as I took another pull of my drink. “She was a bit upset, naturally and then later seemed okay and said we would talk about it later.”

“I’m struggling to find the problem,” Trevor looked at me confused. “It’s a good thing she was okay, so why are you acting like the world is ending?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are,” Bryton interjected. “The paparazzi bombarded the girls at the club, which is horrible, I agree. There's an article about you guys dating and talks about her, yet she seemed okay when you saw her. What’s the issue?”

“The issue?” I slammed my glass down harder than I meant too. “All of that happened because of me.”

Understanding bloomed in their eyes.

“Josie knew this would happen when she started dating you,” Trevor said. “She knows what your life is like.”

“She didn’t know they would write horrible things about her. I don’t want her life turned upside down because of me. She’s already dealt with enough.”

“Have you asked her?”

Silence was my answer.

“Wyatt,” Bryton sighed. “Josie is a grown woman. She can make her own decisions, especially decisions about her life. You’re going to ruin what you have with her by deciding what you *think* she wants.”

“How do you know what she truly thinks about all of this if you haven’t spoken to her?” Trevor added.

“Because I’m not sure I’d survive if she told me she doesn’t want this anymore,” I said softly. The first time I’d spoken the words out loud.

“Dude,” Trevor shot me a look. “We all see how she looks at you. You’d have to be blind not to see how in love with you she is. She’s not going anywhere. She’s literally your perfect match.”

“Look,” Bryton leaned forward. “I’ve been where you are. The press saying nasty things about your girlfriend, having to see her cry and wishing there was a way to stop it. I thought about breaking up with Mila when the hate started. Wanted to protect her any way I could even if it meant leaving her; but my life would suck more without her in it. Handling it together is a whole lot easier than handling it alone.”

I remember the things people said when they found out about Bryton and Mila. The hate, the comments. Way worse than what they’d written about Josie and me.

If Bryton and Mia can make it work, then why couldn’t Josie and me?

I leaned back in my seat as realization hit me.

I'm a fucking idiot.

I almost let some stupid articles ruin the best thing to ever happen to me. Letting people, I didn't even know get into my head and convince me that to make Josie happy she had to be away from me.

I really am the biggest idiot on the planet. No wonder Landon hung up on me earlier.

I needed to get home. Needed to see Josie and tell her that I loved her.

"I need to go."

My two best friends grinned and got to their feet.

"We have a plan."

JOSIE

I looked at my phone for the hundredth time but saw no notification from Wyatt. It'd been two days since I woke up alone in his bed. Two days of calling and texting him, asking what happened. I knew he was okay, because he was in Buffalo playing, although he'd played like crap and was benched the rest of the game.

At first, I understood that he had to leave to get to his game. He drove hours to be here when he could easily get in trouble for leaving before an away game. But when he wouldn't answer my texts or calls, I started to get pissed.

He told me he knew I wouldn't have cheated on him and that everything in that damn article was fake, so why did he leave without a word? Did he decide I wasn't worth the hassle now that people knew about us?

All different kinds of scenarios came to mind the last two days. Each one worse than the last. Now my head tried to convince me that Wyatt was done and now ghosting me. I knew he wouldn't do that… yet the thought lingered.

The morning after the paparazzi and the article, I allowed myself twenty minutes to feel upset about it—to hate that it happened and that my name was all over the internet. But not once did I ever think 'I can't do this', that maybe I should leave because it was all too much.

Was it a lot knowing that someone could snap a picture of me without my permission, simply because I dated Wyatt? That random people knew who I was? Yes. It was way different than the life I'd led but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Not when I had Wyatt by my side.

I knew the moment I fell for Wyatt that things would change in my life. He was a famous athlete. His name was so well known in the sport for his talent and records he's broken, so it made sense why people were obsessed with him. I knew that, and yet I still fell for him.

So, despite everything that happened over the last few days, I had no plans to run. And I would tell Wyatt that, if he would answer his damn phone.

I knew he had hockey commitments and that the team couldn't come home until earlier today, but it didn't lessen the anger I felt over

his silence.

My phone pinged, and for a moment, I'd hoped it was Wyatt, only to see a message in the girls group chat.

Let us know if you want us to come over.

Last night the three of them came over and listened to me rant about everything. Even going as far as to cuss out Wyatt which only made me laugh through my tears because I wished he was there too.

You can take tomorrow off if you need.

Lydia added. I'd worked a little today, but once 2 o'clock hit, I couldn't be there any longer, so she'd let me leave early.

With a soft sigh, sadness settled in my chest as I pushed open the door of my apartment building. The doorman greeted me with a friendly wave, which I returned half-heartedly. At least on the plus side, no paparazzi had shown up here in the last few days. The article disappearing offline probably helped.

I was certain it was Wyatt's doing, even if I couldn't get a hold of him.

Adjusting the strap of my purse and camera bag I stepped into the elevator, hitting the button for my floor. Just as the doors were set to close a hand slid between them, forcing them back open. My eyes moved up and met the face I'd come to know better than my own.

The sight of Wyatt stepping into the elevator with me made me want to jump into his arms and kiss him, and also hit him after two days of pure silence. Instead of doing either I kept my feet planted on the floor.

We stood there staring at one another as the elevator rode up a little bit before suddenly jerking to a stop. I stumbled into him, a sense of deja vu hitting me. His arms held my waist as I gained my footing.

"Don't worry, it's just Trevor and Bryton, they stopped it." Wyatt said, sensing my confusion.

"What are you doing here?" I stepped out of his hold and crossed my arms. No matter how much I wanted to wrap my arms around him I wouldn't. I was hurt that he'd left me. Hurt that he didn't even leave a note to tell me that everything would be okay. That we were okay. Hurt that he hadn't bothered to pick up his phone.

I watched him swallow before speaking. "Josie, I am so sorry."

"Wyatt—"

"Please let me say this." Wyatt pleaded to which I nodded. "I shouldn't have left in the middle of the night, you didn't deserve to

wake up alone after everything that happened." His blue eyes glued to mine. "I left because I was scared. Scared of losing you. Scared of you deciding that I wasn't worth the hassle that comes with my name."

My heart ached at his words. The exact words I'd had myself.

"I thought if I left for good, then you wouldn't have to deal with all of this. Wouldn't have to see your name trending on social media. And it kills me that you've had to experience that, especially without me being here." His eyes had a light sheen across them as he took a tiny step forward. "But Josie, I don't want to leave. I don't want to know what it's like to wake up without you beside me. To not hear your laugh over a stupid commercial or see the way your eyes light up when you eat at Rick's."

With each word he uttered, I felt my heart flutter in my chest. The pressure behind my eyes growing.

"Josie, I love you. Pretty sure I fell in love with you right here in this elevator. I don't care what the media or people online say about us. I just want you by my side."

I completely lost the battle at keeping my tears at bay.

"Don't cry." Wyatt stepped forward, bringing a hand up to wipe at my face. I wrapped my hand around his wrist, keeping his palm cupped to my cheek. I peered up at him, feeling like my heart was about to explode.

"I love you, too."

"You do?" his voice trembled.

"I think I've loved you since you gave me that digesting nutrition bar." I laughed, tears still rolling down my cheeks. Wyatt's own laugh was watery before he bent his head and kissed me.

Every time I'd kissed Wyatt it was like fireworks go off, but this one…this one felt bigger and more meaningful. Like the cracks in my heart finally sealed over.

He pulled back, eyes tracing my face. "I truly am sorry."

"I know." I gave his wrist a squeeze. "But don't you ever try to make a big decision like that for me again or I will put pepper paste in your underwear and make *everything* burn." And I meant every single word.

"There's my feisty 'lil rebel," Wyatt grinned, kissing me again. "I promise."

"Good." I peered up at him from under my lashes as I pressed my front against his. "How long do you think we have until Trevor and Bryton start the elevator back up?"

Wyatt's smile turned wicked and his eyes darkened.

"I think we have time."

"You have a lot of making up to do." I still planned on making him grovel a little.

“I will for the rest of my life, if I have too.”
My only response was to kiss him again.

JOSIE

Two weeks later …

"Just pose right there."

"Like this?" Landon asked as he crossed his arms, standing awkwardly in front of his office door. He looked so uncomfortable, and I was trying my best not to laugh. It was obvious he wasn't a big fan of being in front of the camera.

"Maybe widen your stance a little and loosen your shoulders so you don't look too tense," I suggested.

We were currently at the hockey rink Landon owned, *Hockey Haven*. A while ago, Wyatt told me how much this place meant to Landon and the kids he taught, so I came up with an idea that could help the rink and give kids a fun experience. It had taken a bit of convincing—well a lot of convincing, to get Landon to agree to do it. Especially after he learned it would be featured in *Fusion Weekly*.

I didn't want to brag but being in the magazine had helped a lot of business around here. I'd seen businesses bounce back after their place was featured. The publicity helped so much. And I just knew as soon as the article came out, this place will be flooded with kids and their parents. The fact that he happened to be the brother of Wyatt Boone was just an added bonus.

"Like this?" Landon fixed his stance, looking much better. With a nod, I brought my camera to my eye and snapped a few pictures, trying out different angles. I could tell how uncomfortable he was, so I tried to make it quick. I only needed a few more pictures of him near the ice and he'd be good to go.

"Just a couple more, then you're done, I promise." I sent him an encouraging smile.

"Do you think this will help?" he asked as we walked towards the ice rink, filled with the sounds of skates on the ice as kids talked loudly, brimming with excitement.

"I think so. The pictures will help people see what the place is like and having a written interview about you shows people who you are. And people are always looking for a place to ice skate and this is the

perfect place. You could even do a weekly event where people can skate with music and what not."

"That's actually not a bad idea," Landon nodded. I hid my smile. I could tell this place was his baby and he liked to do things his way. But maybe he could be open to suggestions after all.

Stopping beside the skating rink, I instantly looked for one person. It didn't take long to see Wyatt surrounded by a bunch of little kids in skates. From here, I could hear the kids asking him question after question, talking in loud, excited voices.

"The kids love him. They always ask when he's coming to play with them," Landon said as he watched me watch Wyatt with the kids.

"He's cute with them." Seeing my boyfriend interact with the kids was enough to make my knees weak. Guys who were good with kids were incredibly attractive.

"About once a month we do a thing where all the kids can come and do a little scrimmage against Wyatt, Trevor and Bryton. Some of the other players come too, but those three always show up."

I hadn't known that.

The fact that not just Wyatt came every month to play with the kids was incredible. Just another reason to make me fall more in love with him.

I could tell that my window of cooperation with Landon was rapidly closing, so I directed Landon over to the side of the rink. Directing him in different positions, I quickly snapped the last of the images I needed.

For someone who hated being in front of the camera, Landon did well. He listened to my directions and moved where I wanted him to without complaining. As far as pictures go, he was by far one of my easiest clients. I'd had my fair share of horrible people wanting to tell *me* how to do my job.

"I think I got it," I finally said, clicking through the pictures on my camera and liking how they'd come out so far. "I just need one of you with the kids and Wyatt then you are done."

"Yo Wy!" Landon shouted across the ice to his brother. Wyatt's head snapped in our direction as Landon waved him over.

I grinned as Wyatt led the group of little kids towards me, their little legs trying hard to keep up with Wyatt's long ones.

As he neared, I sucked my bottom lip between my teeth. Clad in a pair of joggers and a Toronto Knights sweatshirt he looked delicious. My eyes raked up and down my boyfriend's form.

And to think he's all mine.

The number of dirty thoughts running through my head should probably be illegal, especially considering little kids were standing in front of me.

“You guys ready for us?” Wyatt asked, his eyes fleeting over to me. Looking me up and down like I just did to him. The heat in his stare had me wishing we were alone.

Ever since we’d said ‘I love you’ to each other, we’d barely left each other's side. The only time we did was to go to work, practice and his games. Even when we hung out with our friends, we were always holding hands, pressed against each other. I literally couldn’t get enough of him.

It’s been two weeks since the incident with the article. After Wyatt apologized, we both agreed that we didn’t want to hide our relationship. People were going to talk anyway, so let them. I was in love with a hot hockey player and if it pissed people off then so what.

We’d had a few run-ins with the paparazzi, but thankfully they weren’t as pushy after Wyatt posted a picture of us on his Instagram. It was weird having people with big cameras following you, but I knew I’d eventually get used to it.

Realizing they were all staring at me, I quickly cast my thoughts aside, my cheeks turning pink. Getting caught checking out your boyfriend was one thing but being caught by a whole group of kids was another.

“Uh yeah, let's get you guys in position,” I said, ignoring Wyatt’s smirk.

With the help of Landon and Wyatt we managed to wrangle all the kids on the ice. Trying to get all fifteen kids in position with all their gear on was a little bit of a hassle, especially with them all trying to stay upright with the weight of the gear.

I cautiously moved around the ice in my shoes as I took pictures. Judging from the wide gins and excited expressions on the kids' faces, this was the best day ever.

Making sure Wyatt and Landon stood in the back with the kids surrounding them, I snapped as many pictures as I could. I knew with kids the amount of time to get a good picture was very limited.

I was proven right when not even five minutes later, the kids started fussing. Most shifting on their feet or messing with their hockey gear. The fact that all fifteen 7-year-olds managed to last this long was amazing.

“All done!” I sent them all a grin. “Good job guys, looking like models already.” The kids let out a collective cheer before skating off with each other, talking animatedly.

“That’s it?” Landon questioned, walking over to me. The fact he easily walked across the ice without falling had me slightly jealous.

“Yep. I’ll add the finishing touches to the article this week and it should be in the following issue.” I had pushed for this piece to be in the next issue even if it was cutting it close with our deadline. Aside

from the fact that Landon needed this more than he let on, I knew putting it in next month's issue would be the perfect time. Christmas was just around the corner and people would love to come ice skating.

"Oh good." Landon looked unsure of what to say next, making me smile. "Thank you, Josie."

"No problem, really." And I meant it. This was my job and if it helped his business then I was all for it. Plus, the two of us have started to like one another. He will always be Wyatt's grumpy-ass older brother, but he wasn't a bad guy.

"I better go make sure the kids don't hurt themselves." With a nod he walked across the ice towards the kids skating around. As soon as he left Wyatt skated up to me. He already towered over me but with his skates I had to crane my neck back to see his face.

"Did you know you look sexy taking pictures?"

I arched an eyebrow at his words as he placed his hands on my hips. "You are so weird."

"Yep, but you love me."

I playfully scrunched my nose up. "Unfortunately, I do."

Wyatt tickled my sides, making me laugh and squirm in his hold.

"You don't have plans for tonight, right?" I shook my head at his question.

"I'm taking you out tonight," he declared.

"Oh? Where to?" The idea of going out made me excited. It had been a little bit since we went out to eat, mostly spending time at his place or mine.

"That's a surprise." Wyatt placed a soft kiss to the tip of my nose. "I'll pick you up at your apartment around 6?"

"That works perfectly."

Gives me enough time to get home from work and get changed.

"Wyatt!" Landon yelled down the ice, breaking our little moment up. Wyatt looked like he wanted to throttle his brother for interrupting us.

"I better get back to work anyways. Get these pictures uploaded," I gestured to my camera around my neck.

"Fine," he huffed. He went to kiss me, but I quickly placed a peck on his lips before pulling away. We were standing there in front of kids—it was definitely not the right time for a make out session.

"I'll see you later," I grinned at the cute little pout on his face.

"I love you," he called after me.

"I love you too."

GRIPPING WYATT'S HAND TIGHTLY, I ignored the flash as camera's clicked around us. Wyatt's big body helped block me from some of it as we slipped through the doors of the restaurant.

Ironically, it was the same fancy restaurant we'd left a few weeks ago. However, this time we were led to a table in the far back and I didn't feel so out of place. I don't know if it was because I'd finally accepted this was my new life, or because I was finally comfortable, but I didn't so much as glance at the people staring at us.

Wyatt pulled out my seat, kissing my cheek before sitting beside me. He purposely moved his chair closer, so his thigh touched mine under the tablecloth. Our table was tucked away in a back corner, cut off from the view of the other patrons.

Unlike last time we were here, we ordered a bottle of wine and food before settling into our seats. I looked at the man next to me, smiling softly that he'd made the effort to bring me here tonight.

Who knew Wyatt Boone was such a romantic.

Wanting to be one of those cheesy couples, I grabbed my phone and lifted it up. I'd yet to post a picture of Wyatt and I on my social media and I was about to change that. Over the last few weeks, I'd steered clear of social media and all the comments that came with the sudden influx of followers I'd gotten. It was about time I posted a cute picture of me and my boyfriend for everyone to see.

Plus, looking this good, I couldn't pass up the chance to take pictures with my man. Wyatt didn't hesitate, leaning into me with a smile. Each picture I took was different, like we were in our own, private photo booth. One we smiled at the camera, the next Wyatt kissed my cheek, then I kissed his. My favorite was Wyatt playfully pretending to bite me as I laughed, the moment perfectly captured.

Wyatt watched as I posted the picture with *'Date night'* and a heart emoji. I smiled at the picture, happy to show everyone that I was proud to call him mine.

"You look sexy in that picture," Wyatt murmured in my ear before kissing the side of my neck, sending a shiver along my spine.

"I'm not the one that looks like a model," I replied.

"Who cares what I look like, babe. You in this dress makes me want to take you right here, regardless of who can see," he whispered huskily as he continued planting kisses along my neck. He knew the sensitive spot made my toes curl. The thought of him taking me right there sent a wave of desire coursing through me.

"And I bet your panties are soaked right now."

I had to suck on my lip so I wouldn't make a sound as I felt his hand on my thigh, slowly pushing up the fabric of my dress. As Wyatt slid his hand up my dress and I quickly looked around, making sure no one could see as he touched my already soaked core. A small gasp

left my lips as he ran the pad of his finger across my lace underwear and my legs spread on their own as he continued rubbing me.

"Already so wet and I've hardly touched you, baby." His breath fanned against my neck as he whispered, and I swallowed the moan that threatened to escape at his dirty words. With deft fingers, he pushed the fabric of my underwear to the side and touched my bare pussy.

I gripped the edge of the table, my eyes wanting to shut but I forced them open as he slid the tip of his finger inside of me. The fact that we could get caught at any moment had me clenching around his finger.

"Here is your wine," the waiter said as he silently appeared at the table, placing our glasses of wine and the bottle. My eyes were so wide as Wyatt kept his finger moving in and out of me under the table. The tablecloth hid everything he was doing yet I felt like the waiter could tell. Glancing over at Wyatt, he didn't seem fazed as he lifted the wine glass to his lips and took a sip before nodding his approval to the waiter.

Wyatt moved his fingers faster as the waiter patiently waited for me to taste mine. It took everything I had to still my shaking hand long enough to raise my glass and take a sip. It barely touched my tongue before I was nodding, wanting the waiter to disappear.

Wyatt had another thing in mind.

"Good baby?" He had the nerve to ask as he finger fucked my pussy under the table, the waiter cluelessly hovering. I tried to nod, but Wyatt chose that moment to curl his fingers, bringing his thumb to my clit.

"Really good." I could hear the tremble in my voice and focused my gaze on my wine glass, unable to bring myself to look at the waiter.

Satisfied, Wyatt dismissed the waiter as the last of my resolve disintegrated.

"Wyatt," I moaned under my breath as I gripped the table once more. Spreading my legs wider, I tilted my hips to give his fingers better access.

"Shh…don't want anyone to hear," he chided, but I could hear the amusement in his tone.

For the next few minutes Wyatt teased me incessantly, bringing me right to the edge only to pull back and slow down. I was completely at his mercy as he made me moan and whimper, my body pushing against him, wanting more. To say I was grateful that our table was tucked in the back was an understatement.

"Our food is coming, you'd better come before it does," he growled in my ear. His fingers picked up the pace, fucking me faster and

harder. I bit my lip so hard that I tasted blood, but I barely noticed as my hips bucked and my legs trembled as I drew closer to coming.

"Wyatt." I gasped.

"That's it. Come for me, baby."

The pressure of his fingers tipped me over the edge and my whole body shook as I leaned to the side, burying my face against Wyatt's chest as I tried to stifle my moans.

After a moment, Wyatt removed his fingers from me, as I sat there breathing heavily. I already wanted his hands back on me, ravenous for something other than food. Seeing the waiter approaching, I quickly straightened and smoothed down my hair.

"Here you are." The waiter placed our dinner before us, smiling before walking away.

I can't believe I just let Wyatt finger me under the table at a restaurant…and that I liked it.

I looked over at my boyfriend, my head finally clearing, as he smirked at me. Without a word, he raised his hand, his eyes locked on mine as he brought his fingers to his lips. Just when I thought I couldn't get any more turned on, Wyatt licked his fingers clean, one by one.

Oh fuck.

"I can't wait for dessert," he grinned, nonchalantly turning his attention to his food. I sat there, stunned, knowing full well I was the dessert.

And I couldn't wait.

JOSIE

"Remind me why I thought this was a good idea."

"I did try to tell you it wasn't," Wyatt said with a shrug as he leaned against the kitchen island. I sighed, taking a sip of the beer in my hands.

I had the bright idea to host a small party with all our friends. And by friends I meant, Tasha, Lydia, Mila, Trevor, Bryton, Landon and Mateo. At first it seemed like a good idea gathering everyone together to get to know one another better. Tasha and Lydia hadn't spent much time with Trevor and Landon, and I thought it would be nice if they did. Bonus if they happened to like each other too.

I should have known it would be a disaster as soon as they stepped into Wyatt's apartment.

Right now, they were all currently sitting in the living room arguing with each other. The only couple minding their own business were Mila and Bryton, who sat back with amused expressions, watching the other four argue.

Lydia and Landon were arguing about some business thing that I had no clue about. They faced each other, moving closer and closer the longer they argued. I wasn't sure if they were going to kiss or throttle each other.

Tasha and Trevor sat on the other side of the couch, arguing about eating fries with ice-cream. It was probably one of the stupidest arguments I'd ever heard, and yet, I could practically feel the sexual tension growing between them.

"Should we stop them?" I asked quietly.

"Eh, Landon and Trevor can hold their own," Wyatt said with a shrug.

"Sure. It's all fun and games until someone gets strangled." I honestly couldn't rule it out at this point.

"My bet is Trevor and Tasha cave first," Wyatt said, eyeing his best friend.

"What are we betting on?" Mateo suddenly appeared at our side, holding the entire tray of chips and dip as he ate from it.

"Josie and I are betting to see who sleeps together first. Trevor and Tasha, or Lydia and Landon."

“Trevor and Tasha.” Mateo didn’t even hesitate. The three of us watched as the pair continued arguing. I caught Tasha’s eyes darting down to Trevor’s lip, a look on her face I’ve seen countless times before.

“Agreed,” Wyatt nodded. “Landon and Lydia will take a while. Landon’s as stubborn as a bull. He won’t give in to Lydia, at least not yet.”

“Lydia’s just as stubborn,” I added. “I’d give them at least a month before they cave.”

“I’d give it a good six months,” Mateo chimed in. “Or we can speed things along.” He flashed us a smirk and took a step towards Landon and Lydia only for Wyatt to grab him by the back of his shirt and yank him back.

“Don’t even think about it.”

“Come on, I was just going to flirt a little,” Mateo whined.

“You can’t flirt,” Wyatt scoffed.

“Excuse me?” Mateo looked appalled. “I can flirt. I have Josie exactly where I want her, don’t I, babe.” He winked and blew me an air kiss. Playing along, I grabbed the kiss out of the air and winked back.

“This,” Wyatt waved between us. “Is not happening.”

“Can’t fight true love,” Mateo said dramatically.

Knowing Wyatt was about to smack his brother, I butted in.

“We’re not really betting anyways.”

“But we could,” Wyatt suggested.

“You want to bet on our friends sleeping together?”

He just blinked at me. “Yes.”

“Oh! We could start a group chat and talk about them behind their backs,” Mateo grinned.

“Uh…”

“I bet Bryton and Mila would join in,” Wyatt nodded along with his younger brother.

Are we really about to make bets on our friends?

I opened my mouth to try and argue some sense into the pair of them, when I noticed Tasha and Trevor standing. The three of us tried to act like we weren’t doing anything as Trevor sauntered over.

“I’m gonna head out,” he said. “Thanks for inviting me over Josie, we’ll definitely have to do it again.” He gave me his charming smile before pulling me in for a quick hug. To my side, I caught Mateo grinning behind his soda can.

“I’m going to go too. Long day and I’m exhausted,” Tasha said as she came over to us while Trevor did his bro hug with Wyatt. I raised an eyebrow at her excuse. We both knew it was a lie. Neither of us worked Saturdays.

“I bet,” I said. Her sheepish smile let me know I was right. A small part of me wanted to tell her it was a bad idea. Sleeping with Trevor wouldn’t end well for either of them, but I knew it wasn’t my place. They could make their own decisions, and I wasn’t going to tell Tasha what to do. She’s a big girl.

“Let me know when you get home.” I pulled her into a hug, biting back any remarks. If she wanted to act like she wasn’t about to leave with Trevor, then I would turn the other cheek.

I’m sure I’ll hear all about it eventually.

A light blush colored her cheeks before she quickly headed for the door. I chuckled under my breath. The two of them weren’t fooling anyone. Trevor hung back for another minute talking to Mateo before leaving.

Once the door shut, Wyatt turned to me with a raised eyebrow.

“That’s gonna be fun,” he said.

“Maybe they’ll be good for each other,” I shrugged, silently praying I was right. Tasha didn’t need any more heartbreak, and as much as I loved Trevor, he had heartbreak written all over him. I’d barely grabbed my drink when Lydia walked up with her purse in hand.

“Sorry to leave early, Josie.”

“You’re leaving too?”

“Yeah, I need to make sure I have everything set for Monday’s issue.” I caught sight of a brooding Landon at her back, staring right at her. I had a feeling I didn’t even want to touch that subject. Ignoring the tension between the two of them, I pulled her into a hug.

“Don’t work too hard and let me know when you get home.”

“Will do.” She said a quick goodbye to the others before stomping out the door, not bothering to look back at Landon who still watched her.

Seconds later, Landon said a tense goodbye and left just as quickly.

That’s going to be…interesting.

Mateo and Wyatt stared after their brother with raised eyebrows.

“You two throw great parties,” Bryton teased as he and Mila came over. I shook my head with a sigh.

“If I’d known that was going to happen, I would have kept them all separated.”

“It was definitely entertaining. Going to make future get-togethers interesting,” Mila grinned. “That was better than television.”

“Hundred bucks Trevor and Tasha become fuck buddies,” Bryton said with a grin, oblivious to the fact we’d discuss the same thing just minutes ago.

“Want to make it interesting about Landon and Lydia?” Wyatt asked, winking at me.

Yep, we really are about to make bets on our friends.

"What are you thinking?" Bryton asked.

Mila and I shared a look as Wyatt, Bryton and Mateo started hatching their plan.

"Everyone picks a date they think either couple will sleep together and whoever guesses right gets $300 bucks," Wyatt suggested.

"What if they sleep together tomorrow but we don't find out for a couple of months?" Mila questioned.

Good point.

"Does it have to be an exact date?" I asked.

"Can be a rough estimate like…within a month of the date you say," Bryton said.

"Works for me," Mateo shrugged. "And we can have a group chat where we can talk about the timelines."

All of us shared a look before Wyatt turned to me. I rolled my eyes and nodded.

"Fine, let's bet on when our friends will have sex."

"Hell yeah!" Mateo cheered.

"Easiest $300 bucks I'll ever make," Bryton laughed

Within minutes Mateo had all five of us in a group chat. I snorted at the name.

Only Mateo.

"Everyone should have their bets placed by tomorrow. And remember," Wyatt looked directly at me. "No interfering."

"I would never!"

I so would.

"Uh huh."

I grinned knowing he didn't believe me for a second. Mila nudged me as she giggled.

"Let's go *Bang Bet Club,"* Mateo cheered again, punching his fist in the air.

JOSIE

One Month Later …

"You can do this, Josie. It will be okay." I tried to give myself a pep talk in the mirror, but it wasn't really working.

I hated this day. I knew it was coming and tried to bury it, but of course that didn't work. Gripping the counter, I closed my eyes and took a few deep breaths, trying to stop the panic attack from building.

Does it ever get easier?

I knew it would eventually, but not today. A knock on the door brought me out of my thoughts. I really didn't want to do this, but I knew I had to. I couldn't hide out in here all day as much as I wanted to.

Setting my shoulders back, I steeled myself for the day ahead. Giving myself one last nod I turned and opened the bathroom door.

"You okay?" My amazing boyfriend asked, reaching out and cupping my cheek. I leaned into his palm and closed my eyes.

"I will be," I answered truthfully.

"You sure you want me to come with you?"

As if I can't love him anymore.

"I want you there." And I meant it. I wanted him by my side today.

"It looks like it may start raining, we probably want to get going," Wyatt said softly as he brushed his thumb against my cheek. He knew just how hard this day was, and it meant the world that he was there with me.

"Okay." Threading our fingers together Wyatt led me out of my apartment and to the elevator. His thumb brushed the tops of my knuckles as we silently rode it down to the lobby.

As soon as we stepped outside, I looked up, the sky dark and stormy.

Pretty fitting for today.

I breathed in the smell of rain as Wyatt held the passenger side door open. Usually, I hated him treating me like I was fragile, but in this moment I appreciated it. He knew all I needed right now was him.

The car ride over was quiet except for the music playing softly on

the radio as I gripped Wyatt's free hand in my lap. The closer we got, the tighter the ache around my chest cinched.

A few minutes later, Wyatt parked in front of the one place I hated coming to.

Park Lawn Cemetery.

A lump formed in my throat as I looked at the front gates. The fact I hadn't been there in a little while made me drown in guilt.

"Want to go in alone first?" Wyatt asked but I kept my eyes straight ahead. I knew the path by heart—40 steps straight, turn left for 10 steps and I'd be there.

"Would that be okay?" I needed to be alone at first.

"Of course, babe. Take as long as you need. Just text me whenever you want me to come in, or not," he squeezed my hand supportively.

Knowing I couldn't put it off any longer, I leaned over and placed a soft kiss on Wyatt's cheek before slipping out of the car. The air was chilly as the wind slowly picked up. I wrapped my arms around myself, thankful for my thick sweater.

My feet moved on their own as I entered the cemetery, crunching on the dried leaves that coated the ground. I'd dreaded this day all year. The irrational part of my brain told me if I just ignored it then it wasn't real. But it was.

I passed headstone after headstone, heading for the one I knew by heart. It only took another minute for me to find the one I was looking for. Tears welled in my eyes as I stared at my father's grave.

I brushed the fallen leaves off his headstone, letting my fingertips trace his name and the words written on the bottom.

Anthony Scott.
Beloved father and friend.
Until We Meet Again.

"Hey dad, happy birthday," I whispered. "Can't believe it's your birthday already." It felt like yesterday he was with me, laughing at some dumb joke, yelling at the television, having Sunday dinner with me.

My dad always hated celebrating his birthday. He thought it was pointless at his age, but no matter what, every year I baked him a cake, and decorated with streamers and balloons. Dad always said he hated it, but his eyes always lit up when he saw them. The two of us would spend the entire day together doing whatever he wanted, even if that meant just sitting and watching television together.

"I'm sorry I haven't been by in a little bit." With everything that

had happened, it'd been a few months since I'd visited.

God, I'm such a bad daughter. How could I have not made time to visit him?

My chin trembled as I squatted.

"I wish you were here, Dad. You should be here."

It was unfair that someone so good and loving was gone. Life was so unfair. I quickly squashed those thoughts. I knew if I let them take over, I'd end up drowning in grief like I had when he first passed.

"But you wouldn't believe who I met, Dad." A teary smile spread across my face as I thought of Wyatt. "A few months ago, I got stuck in my apartment building's elevator with a stranger and guess who it was…Wyatt Boone. Yep, Wyatt Boone from the Toronto Knights." In my head I could see my dad's face light up at hearing Wyatt's name.

As a diehard ice-hockey fan, my dad definitely knew who Wyatt was. I remembered the day the Knights drafted Wyatt and how my dad said the team would finally win a Cup Championship—the first in years.

Ironically, he once commented on how close in age Wyatt and I were.

'Josie, he's near your age and he's quite handsome, you should try and date him'.

At the time, I waved him off, because how could someone like me end up with a guy like Wyatt? He was a celebrity here, and there was no way he'd give a nobody like me the time of day.

Yet, Dad had said the same thing almost every time we watched the Knights play. Now looking back, I couldn't help but wonder if he'd known something I didn't.

"You always said I should date him and I am."

Crazy how things work sometimes.

"And he is amazing, Dad. He is seriously the greatest guy on the planet. Sometimes I have to pinch myself to make sure he's real and that he's mine."

Some days I do wake up and think I've dreamt it all.

But then I'll roll over and see him lying beside me with an arm thrown over my waist and our legs entwined.

"You would like him. He'd be the first boyfriend you approved of." I knew without a doubt Wyatt and my dad would get along the second they met.

He hadn't approved of my ex's, and I now understood why. He wanted me to find someone like Wyatt. Someone caring, funny, kind, and family oriented like I was. Someone who would challenge me but also keep me steady and catch me when I fell.

Wyatt was that guy for me.

"I'm happy Dad. I'm really happy. But I sometimes feel guilty

because I shouldn't be happy, not with you gone and not here to see the reason why I am. You won't get to see me happy and in love with the man you knew one day would deserve me."

Tears ran down my face as I placed a hand over my mouth to silence my sob.

The breeze picked up and fanned across my face, the cold brushing against my cheeks almost like a hand caressing it. Closing my eyes, I let the wind wash over my face.

I wasn't sure how long I sat there with my eyes closed, leaning into the wind. When I finally did open my eyes, a sudden feeling of ease washed over me. The sadness was still there, but for some reason the guilt wasn't as strong.

Looking at my dad's headstone, I wanted to believe it was a sign from him. Letting me know it was okay to be happy. That while he may not be here physically, it didn't mean he wasn't with me.

Sitting for a little longer, I finally sent Wyatt a text asking him to join me. I wanted my dad to meet the man who had slowly put my broken pieces back together. And I wanted Wyatt to meet the man who'd raised me all on his own and worked so hard so I could have everything I needed growing up.

A few minutes later, I heard the sound of Wyatt's footsteps as he approached. I slowly stood, my legs almost giving out from squatting for so long. Seeing Wyatt hesitantly walking towards me I took a few steps until I could reach his hand.

Wyatt's eyes searched my face, I wondered how I must have looked to him, with my puffy, red-rimmed eyes and puffy cheeks from crying. As his brows furrowed with concern, my heart warmed.

"Wyatt, this is my dad, Anthony. Dad…this is Wyatt." I introduced the two. It was a bit odd and awkward introducing my boyfriend to my dad's headstone, yet Wyatt made it seem like the most natural thing in the world as he greeted dad with ease.

"It's nice to meet you, sir."

I squeezed his hand, feeling the tears return.

"I want to tell you how amazing your daughter is." Wyatt looked down at me as he spoke.

"I also want you to know that one day, I am going to ask your beautiful daughter to marry me. I promise you, I will give her the life she deserves and love her until my last breath, because she is the best thing that has ever happened to me."

There was no stopping my tears now.

Damn this wonderful man.

"And I promise she will never feel unloved when I'm by her side."

There were no words to describe how much I loved him. The man who made me feel like I was worth something. That I wasn't just some

broken, used girl, who didn't deserve love.

I hoped he could see the love in my eyes as he talked to my dad, that he could see how much his actions meant to me. We stayed there a little longer before we felt the first warning drops of rain. I placed a kiss on my dad's headstone and said a soft goodbye.

"I'll be back soon, Dad. I promise."

Walking away from my dad, I felt a million times lighter than when I first stepped foot in the cemetery. For the first time since he passed, I felt…okay. I knew Dad watched over me and I knew he would approve of Wyatt. That alone eased the guilt that had built inside of me.

Wyatt and I only made it around the corner before the skies above us opened up, and we were caught in the torrential rain. Wyatt tried to make a run for it, my hand clasped in his, but I found my feet stuck to the ground.

"Hold on."

Turning, he looked down at me with those gorgeous blue eyes. "What's wrong?"

Despite the rain and the fact, we stood in a cemetery, a smile spread across my face; the rain pelting down, making our clothes stick to our skin.

Staring up at Wyatt, I knew without a doubt, without hesitation, that Wyatt was my forever. He was the person I'd searched for my whole life. The day we got stuck in the elevator was the day my life became complete.

"I love you."

"I love you, too…uh, this couldn't wait until we got in the car?" Wyatt looked at me with a mix of amusement and concern.

"Yeah, but I wanted to tell you now." I tugged my hand out of his and took a step closer. Bringing my hands up to his shoulders, I tangled my fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck.

"You, Wyatt Boone, are the most perfect man."

"Hmm, I don't know about that." His hands came down to my hips, softly squeezing, the rain forgotten.

"Yes, you are." I swallowed a lump in my throat. "You are my everything, Wyatt Boone. I hope you know that."

"I meant every word I said back there. One day I'll ask you to marry me, Josie Scott, because you are my everything too."

I pulled him down and pressed my lips to his. Before I met Wyatt, I'd feared I wouldn't find love. Afraid of giving myself to someone completely. That they would see the real me and my baggage and run the other way. But I knew that no matter what, Wyatt would catch me, and that maybe it wasn't so scary falling.

So, as I kissed Wyatt in the pouring rain, I realized I no longer had

the fear of falling.

JOSIE

"I think I'm going to be sick."

"It's okay, there's still time."

"Bro, she's going to break my hand."

I heard all of their voices, but I was too focused on what was happening on the ice to care. I felt Mateo trying to pull his hand from mine, but I latched on even harder.

"Josie, ease up a little," he groaned. I briefly took my eyes away from the ice and smiled sheepishly at Mateo, letting go of his hand.

"Sorry."

"Geez woman, are you secretly the hulk?" he said as he shook his hand out and flexed it.

"Hey, I warned you about sitting next to me." On the other side of me Mila snickered.

"Gotta toughen up there little, bro." Behind us Landon slapped his brother's shoulder and Mateo glared at him over his shoulder. If I wasn't so stressed about the game, I would have laughed at their bickering, Evelyn just shook her head and leaned forward to talk to Mila. I felt bad that Tasha and Lydia weren't here, but the two had to work and couldn't make the flight over.

I looked around the arena, trying to settle my nerves as Coach talked to the players on the sidelines. Although seeing how packed the arena was it didn't ease my anxiety.

The hockey arena in Boston was huge, like *really* huge. Every seat was filled for tonight's game, which was to be expected. It was the *Cup Championship* final—a do-or-die game.

The Toronto Knights had a one game lead against the Boston Bears, and if they won tonight, they would win the *Cup Championship*. And currently, we were tied 2-2, in overtime, so we needed one goal to win. One goal.

I'd been a ball of nerves since the playoffs started and it'd only grown as the team progressed through the cup finals. I was certain I was more nervous about tonight's game than anyone else, including Wyatt and the team.

Wyatt had worked so hard for this moment. To come back from a knee injury and make it to the finals was a huge deal. He was playing

the best he ever had, too. The fact that he'd brought his team back after losing quite a few games at the start of the season was amazing. It just showed how great of a player and captain he was.

It'd been six months of early morning practices, days on the road for away games, and trying to juggle a new relationship on top of it. There were bad days for us. Little arguments about the other person being too busy and not making time for the other. But they never lasted long. How could I stay mad at a guy who five minutes later would come up, wrap his arms around me, placing kisses along my neck while telling me he loved me. It was next to impossible.

I won't lie, the Playoffs were hard on both of us. Wyatt was gone for days at a time and traveling back and forth for each game. When he was home, he was either exhausted or at practice with the team. It even led to a fight with me telling him he was working too hard and if he didn't slow down, he would re-injure himself.

It was the worst fight we'd had so far. I was just concerned with how hard he was pushing himself, only he took my words to mean I didn't want him playing anymore. We both got caught up in the heat of the moment, yelling at each other.

Wyatt had stormed out of my apartment back to his.

Two full days of no contact.

Both of us were too stubborn to apologize first, even though we were both miserable. It may have only been two days, but it was the longest two days of my life. On day three, I gave in and went up to his apartment only to run into him doing the same thing. Let's just say making up lasted all night.

"Here we go," I announced as the players got back on the ice. It was seriously do-or-die right now. As soon as I saw Wyatt on the ice, I gripped Mateo's hand again. From the corner of my eye, I saw him wince, but he didn't say a word.

My leg bounced nervously as I watched the guys fight for the puck, inches away, every player putting their all into the last few minutes.

"Come on, come on," I chanted under my breath as I caught sight of Wyatt moving down the ice, the puck in front of him. Like always, Trevor and Bryton were right there beside him, blocking and weaving around other players. Even after all this time, I was still in awe at the way they all moved together.

The other players on the team were trying their hardest to keep their opponents at bay as the three skated towards the goal. Pieces of ice flew up from beneath their skates and I could practically feel the determination coming off them. I knew everyone else around me felt the same, as we all sat there with bated breath for one of them to score.

As Wyatt neared the goalie my grip on Mateo's hand got even

tighter as I scooted forward. This was it. I only had eyes on my man as he skated as fast as he could.

“Shoot! Shoot!”

Almost like he’d heard me, Wyatt drew his stick back and sent a fast slap shot straight for the net. It was like everything slowed down as the puck shot through the air. The goalie lunged to the side, missing the puck completely as the puck flew past him, striking the back of the net.

The buzzer sounded, and the entire stadium erupted in deafening cheers. I launched to my feet, screaming.

They won!

I turned to Mila, both of us jumping up and down as we wrapped our arms around each other. Landon, Mateo and Evelyn were no better as they screamed for Wyatt.

Turning towards the ice, I saw Wyatt skating towards me, ignoring his other teammates as they hugged and slapped each other. Unexpected tears welled at the sight of him. He took his helmet off, his hair stuck to his forehead with sweat, but he was literally glowing. The smile on his face mirrored my own.

I was seated behind the glass but that didn’t stop Wyatt from coming right up to it, placing his hand on the glass. I felt the tears run down my face as I pressed my hand against his.

I knew this moment meant more to him than he’d ever say. There were times where he’d doubted his ability to get here, but I never did. I’d seen it on his face that very first game I went to. This was his comeback and boy, did he do it.

“I love you,” I mouthed.

“I love you,” he mouthed back. At that exact moment Trevor and Bryton came up and tackled him to the ground, yelling and cheering as they dog-piled Wyatt.

Laughing, I wiped at my tears. Never could I have imagined that I’d feel so complete, so happy.

And it was just the beginning.

BOOK TWO

Follow Trevor and Tasha's Story
Coming in 2025

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Kenadee Bryant is a new adult author of steamy romance, and currently lives in Nevada with her two dogs and cat. When not writing, you can find her reading, playing board games, or eating peanut butter cups. Alongside writing, Kenadee would love to one day open an animal sanctuary.